

# WARHAMMER 40,000

**Chris Dows: THE MOUTH OF CHAOS**



The roar of unbreathable air blasted past Zachariah's ears, rattling the tinted visor on his heavy pressure helmet and blurring his vision. Directly beneath him, more than eighty Elysians plunged towards the gaping maw of Rysgah City two kilometres below in close formation. Fourth Platoon's captain, distinguished from the others by the outer red banding on the central yellow strip of his helmet, directed the drop from the lowest tier with deft flicks of his gloved hands.

It was too loud to use vox effectively so helmet comms were turned off, chatter and static replaced by the veteran sergeant's own practised, rhythmic breathing. Despite wearing a thick thermal liner, his arms ached from the freezing cold and the full-reach spread he'd kept up since exiting the drop-ship; it increased stability and reduced fall rate, but the price was a bone-numbing fatigue that would be hard to shake off until well after landing. It was perilous enough dropping into a battle zone; the recovery time from the fall itself was a problem few non-Elysians would understand or appreciate.

Luckily, he knew he could rely on his veteran special weapons team to look after themselves and each other from the second they threw themselves from the belly of their high-altitude Valkyrie troop carrier. Zachariah glanced to his left, taking care not to wrench his neck by presenting too large a profile to the merciless jetstream: demolition experts Adullam and Beor fell gracefully despite their violently rippling dark olive jumpsuits and body-lashed weapons, while to the right the forms of Sojack, Coarto and the massive shape of Melnis kept an effortless perfect distance between each other, seemingly oblivious to their terminal velocity.

Returning his gaze downwards, the view below him was exactly that presented in the briefing room of the Obliteration short hours earlier – the huge, dish-shaped valley containing Rysgah's capital loomed larger in the crisp dawn light, its towering outer walls striated by aeons of volcanic activity. Rysgah was a black, ugly planet, just the kind of world that Chaos would embrace as its own, and the massive shadows created by the slowly rising sun made the rim of the crater look like a mouth full of broken teeth.

An exaggerated full-arm signal from the captain caught Zachariah's eye and, as one, all six special weapons veterans pulled their arms tight into their bodies and tipped forwards, increasing speed thanks to their shifted centre of balance. As

they hurtled through the layers of falling men, he noticed some of the rookies struggling to keep their bodies under control. They'd get the dressing down of their lives when – or if – they landed safely, and he hoped they wouldn't be his team's back-up on this mission – the last thing he needed was having to look out for less experienced troops.

Steering away from the main group with a roll of the shoulders, the six were joined by two standard infantry squads, the twenty-six-strong group hurtling down in a V-shaped formation towards the western flank of the city's outer wall and a clearing only recently secured by First and Second Platoons.

With the upper rim of the extinct volcano only seconds away to his right, Zachariah could see the shimmering blue void shields dancing around its massive circumference. Somewhere beneath them, penned inside the city's impossibly cramped streets and crumbling ancient towers, were countless civilians caught up in the Rysgahan planetary defence force's descent into madness. Facing Chaos forces smashing their way through the neighbouring Arx Gap and fearing the total destruction of their planet, a brutal rebellion had quickly swept through their ranks, ending in this stand-off within the sheer walls of Rysgah City.

The planet's volcanic nature gave the Rysgahans almost limitless geothermal energy to power their defensive networks, and despite their best efforts to bombard the rebels into submission the Navy had failed to break the stalemate. This waste of effort played nicely into the hands of the insurgents who saw it as a simple waiting game – once the Chaos forces arrived, they would throw in their lot with the agents of evil and embrace the darkness. Unfortunately, those Rysgahans who remained loyal to their beloved Emperor would be surplus to requirements and, as such, executed in their hundreds of thousands, military or civilian.

Well, thought Zachariah, the rebels hadn't counted on the 158th being called in to stop them.

The massive curved walls of the volcano loomed huge in his vision, pockmarked by vast craters barely visible in the blackened crystalline rock. An earlier plan had been to use the larger holes caused by the aerial bombing as entrances to the interior of the city, but this had been discounted as too risky even for drop-troops.

Something about those holes made him feel uneasy. He motioned a warning to Adullam and Beor, who immediately mimicked the movement to the other three. They dipped and rolled away from the wall, trusting the instincts of their sergeant.

As the infantry squads continued to fall around him, Zachariah's awareness went into full sniper mode, his gaze darting from point to point, automatically scanning and analysing any and every detail he could see. Some of those holes were very deep, and the angle of the shafts meant they didn't come from external detonations. No, these looked like they'd been drilled from the inside—

Zachariah's world went red, a scarlet mist coating his visor. For a split second he couldn't quite understand what had happened, but then, as he felt the wet impact of exploded flesh hit his side, he knew he'd been caught in the total annihilation of a human body.

Wiping his visor with the back of his gloved hand, he could just make out the perpetrator of the attack through a smudge of blood. Incredibly, the Rysgahans had managed to haul a Hydra tank turret up the inside of the volcanic walls and position it as a makeshift anti-aircraft weapon in the mouth of a cave halfway up the sheer rock face. The quadruple muzzles blazed into life, tracer dancing in lethal lines from the exposed cave and spreading outwards in a deadly arc. By the Emperor – this hadn't been in the briefing!

Clearly panicked by the last thing they expected and wanted to encounter, some of the less experienced Guardsmen began to bunch together in confusion, forgetting their training and forming a larger, tempting target. The three-strong rebel crew wasted no time in traversing their weapon on its improvised mount towards them, the loader working overtime to maintain the decimating hail of fire.

Projectiles passed through one trooper as if he was wet tissue, spattering tiny gobbets of flesh in all directions and turning the man into a bloody cloud. A second lived just long enough to see the bottom half of his body completely eviscerated, the shock and torrent of blood loss mercifully claiming his life before he had time to scream.

While his own squad was safely out of the way, Zachariah calculated the remainder of Fourth Platoon would pass within range of the weapon even if they'd spotted what was happening from above. Something had to be done, and now. Hitting the thrusters on his grav harness, Zachariah halted his descent with a sickening jolt, the straps cutting into his armpits. In the recesses of his mind, a chrono was running, counting down the time he had to stay in position and, based on what he'd just witnessed, how long it would take the Rysgahans to zero in on his location. He had somewhere around fifteen to twenty seconds, he concluded as more bodies erupted in scarlet plumes around him.

A familiar sensation overwhelmed Zachariah, an uncanny calm that he had practised and mastered through sheer will and determination over his years of active service. Adrenaline and endorphins flooded into his body but he controlled the rush of excitement, instead using the heightened sensations to focus with supreme clarity on the target. Nothing existed other than the three rebels, their weapon and him; he was perfectly aware of the stream of deadly fire creeping closer and closer, of the carnage it would wreak if it hit him, but it simply didn't matter.

Calculations flooded his mind – angles of potential beam deflection, the instability of his own precarious position, the distance and elevation to the gouged-out hole in the side of the volcanic wall. Heavy-gloved fingers unlatched his lasgun and, despite the extra distortion created by the blood-smeared visor, Zachariah brought the telescopic sight to his eye and regarded the furiously working trio in hazy detail, turning down the image intensifier to minimum in the gradually brightening morning light.

The deadly hail was only seconds away, tearing through the rarefied air as streaks of mortal danger. Like many of his fellow veterans, the sergeant had modified his weapon to suit his style of combat – for him, it meant removing the trigger guard completely, somewhat dangerous for a less experienced soldier but not for a man who'd been serving Elysia and the Emperor for thirty-six years.

The left thruster on his grav-chute sputtered, pitching him diagonally until it cut back in, and he had to track back to the three men; but the shot was ready.

Hold breath. Wait. Exhale. Squeeze.

The rebel he guessed to be the commander was the first to go, with a shot to the upper chest passing neatly through his grubby brown carapace armour and continuing out through the back, splattering fluid and bone into the darkness of the cave. A look of astonishment came over the soldier's face as he looked down at the smoking hole in his chest, then to the gaping loader who crouched over the makeshift weapon clearly struggling to cope with what he was seeing.

As the commander fell to the floor like a dropped sack, the bottom of the loader's jaw disappeared in a crimson slash. Clawing wildly at the gushing mess, he staggered to his feet in absolute panic and ran to the back of the cave, any threat he once posed now gone forever.

The third Rysgahan was made of sterner stuff, obviously a veteran of some order, and with teeth gritted he made straight for the firing controls of the Hydra. Zachariah took the opportunity to shoot him right between the eyes, just below the small peak of his close-fitting, tarnished bronze helmet, the beam cutting and cauterising his brain in an instant. Slumping sideways, he fell onto the now silenced Hydra's feed casing. The blood running from his gaping dead mouth made the heated metal steam with every red drop.

Without hesitation, Zachariah clipped his lasgun back on to his quick-release chest harness and cut power to the thrusters, dropping immediately. Arrowing down head-first with arms flat to his sides, he increased his speed to a plummet, putting some distance between himself and the rest of Fourth Platoon above and behind. Waiting for the very last moment of safe freefall, he slammed his hand onto the grav-chute deployment rune and felt the familiar, sickening jolt of deceleration in his stomach. Looking down between his feet as a guide, he spotted the impossibly small section cordoned off for them within the black, brittle ground of the landing zone.

He hit the surface heavily, staggering forwards with the momentum but managing to avoid the rookie indignity of crashing into one of the many temporary structures and stacks of battered rectangular drop-canisters surrounding the area. Dozens of Elysians milled around, carrying ammunition and supplies towards a large smoking hole at the base of the overwhelming volcanic wall. The noise was deafening: boots crunching on the gritty black sand, shouts and calls from hastily

erected tents and shacks, volleys fired into the air from heavy guns towards the few remaining Rysgahan wall emplacements within range.

Pulling off his helmet, he could feel that the air was warming in the morning sun and despite the smell of rotten eggs caused by the engineers' recent blasting he was glad to shed the weight of his drop-gear. The upper layers of compacted ash had at first allowed Elysian engineers to quickly make an entrance at the base of the wall, but a series of much harder rock striations had slowed them down considerably. He hoped they didn't have to hang around for long.

Pulling off his right glove, he began nursing some feeling back into his aching limbs, flexing his knuckles and running a calloused hand through his short dark hair. With fingers still numb from the cold, he felt a slick wet patch on his cheek; looking down, he found blood and matter glistening on his dirty hand. He wiped the mess away on the side of his fatigues and with a sigh cleaned off the top of his helmet so the white sergeant's stripe running down its middle could be seen again.

'So much for intelligence, sarge. We nearly got pasted there.' Adullam wasn't one for holding back his opinion, something that had got him into more than a few situations where his body hadn't been able to uphold the promises his mouth had made. The craggy, scarred face of Zachariah's oldest friend and comrade was still pale from the drop, but there was no time for full recovery – he and the shorter, disproportionately wider form of Beor crouched over a dozen Voss-pattern demolition charges just outside the landing zone, checking the flat, metallic discs for impact damage with a speed that would normally suggest a lack of thoroughness.

Not those two, thought Zachariah as he stood before his squad, checking the integrity of his sniper rifle by touch. When they set their minds to blowing someone or something up, they never failed.

'You know what the Navy's like, Adullam. Everything's based on what they can see from their window.' Melnis barked a laugh at his own joke, lifting the enormous bulk of his MkII plasma gun by the front-mounted bipod with one massive hand and staring straight down the barrel, its charred interior illuminated by the rising sun behind him.

‘Bloody Throne, Melnis. You nearly had our heads off there!’ Sojack snarled up at the hulking form, interrupting the fitting of a specially made extension tube onto his Voss-pattern grenade launcher. Coarto stopped too, his identical MkV unit partially assembled across his thigh.

‘Oh, I’m sorry if I interrupted your playtime, boys. I know how fond you are of those little toys.’

Sojack looked over to his best friend and they shook their heads as one, turning their attention back to improving the accuracy of their well-worn launchers. They weren’t biting – not today.

‘Now don’t be upsetting the Fourth’s finest, Melnis. Just remember how they saved your big, thick neck on Carmelia.’

Melnis snorted over at the smiling Beor, while Coarto and Sojack grinned up at him, still covered by his considerable shadow. Zachariah sighed, having heard it all before a hundred times, but it comforted him to see everyone in good spirits before a battle.

He noticed that Sojack and Coarto had re-inked the tattoos on the backs of their shaven heads. Each had the opposing half of the 158th’s aquila symbol, a stylised, swooping Imperial eagle with the skull of an ork in one talon and an eyepatch-wearing human head in the other. Their party trick was to put their heads together as a prelude for instigating brief, brutal and, to them, hugely enjoyable fist-fights with anyone they could find stupid enough to argue with or insult them.

‘I’d like to invite them on a drop one day, sarge. See how they like the nasty surprises we always seem to get.’

Beor was on his feet now, packing half a dozen of the heavy explosive devices into a rucksack by their stubby handles, breathing heavily as he did so. Built like an Elysian valley ox, his head and neck were virtually the same thickness, leading to the less than flattering nickname ‘Bulldozer Beor’ among his close

friends. Despite his outward appearance of being unfit, they all knew this to be a dangerous assumption to make; his girth only added to his destructive potential.

There was no answer from Zachariah, whose attention was drawn to a sudden increase in activity at the mouth of the nearby drill-hole as several Elysian engineers ran from the man-made cavern. Seconds later, the ground shook and a huge, stinking black cloud billowed out of the entrance, bringing an uneasy silence to the encampment which a moment later broke with a roar as Third Platoon began pouring into the hole. Within seconds the unmistakable sound of close-quarter combat echoed into the foetid air.

‘We’ve breached the inner wall of Rysgah City, men. You know your orders: for the 158th and for the Emperor!’ Fourth Platoon’s captain took the lead within seconds of landing, his veteran personal guard shedding their harnesses and readying weapons as they cut a path through the milling soldiers. Zachariah and his squad fell in behind the surviving Guardsmen who had made it through the Hydra assault, assigned as their support for this mission. Zachariah replaced his helmet and buckled up, and before putting on his glove took a swig of water in an attempt to wash away the stench of the planet. It didn’t work.

The Elysians bunched up as they reached the mouth of the entrance in a swarm of dark-green camouflaged bodies, and Adullam looked back to Zachariah with a frown, more cracks than ever thrown into stark relief on his beaten face from the sunrise creeping steadily into the sky behind them. The heat was already stifling inside the poorly lit tunnel; the engineers had done a spectacular job in a short period of time, but it was too narrow and too low for troops to mount a full-on assault. This kind of bottleneck could only mean huge casualties on entering the killzone; which in itself was bad enough, but stepping over the bodies of fellow drop-troops could be too much for rookies and even for veterans never got any easier to face.

‘Weapons ready, squad. This is going to be unpleasant.’

Armed and armoured bodies pressed against each other, all eager to get to the fight. A soft glow of light could be seen in the distance, hazy shadows dancing and crossing in a blur of activity across its radius. Three loud explosions shook the tunnel and it was all Zachariah could do to keep his footing on the smooth, wet

rock. Small-arms fire increased significantly after the final boom; screaming and shouting echoed from the walls, but something else could be heard too, a ghostly, amplified voice that drifted in and out of audibility.

‘I am the voice of Rysgah, I am the mouth of Chaos. Do not fight us. Join us. Together we can embrace the darkness...’

The voice rasped on Zachariah’s nerves and he shook his head to clear it, his mouth twisting. Join them? Had the hundreds of thousands of Rysgahan civilians had any real option in the face of their military’s treachery? The rebels had already left entire cities full of bodies in their retreat to the sanctuary of Rysgah City. Zachariah had seen many disturbing things in briefings before, but the sight of innocents not even accorded the decency of a burial or pyre but left to rot in the stinking, corrosive air of this vile planet filled him with a deep but, for him at least, still controllable fury.

‘How do you want to play it, sarge?’ Melnis had taken the lead but was barely able to bring his weapon to bear, such was the crush from the rest of Fourth Platoon before him. His voice had an edge of frustration, something Zachariah knew Melnis continually struggled with. Given the option he’d hop into the largest, most destructive vehicle available and shoot, ram and generally smash his way into and through a combat zone, but in such a confined space, Melnis felt claustrophobic and vulnerable. The best way to deal with him was to be straight and simple.

‘Two threes. Sojack, Coarto, fill your tubes and flank Melnis. Watch your feet on exit as there’ll be bodies all over the place. Fire at anything that moves. Adullam and Beor are with me. Wait for the ranks in front to get clear then move out.’ Turning to the support squad behind him, he told them to await further instruction following their exit. No point in pushing them out first to get uselessly killed, as they’d certainly need as many men as possible when they reached their objective.

Zachariah could hear all five of his men shuffling into position. They were ready.

A deafening volley of fire from the mouth of the tunnel created a gap for Zachariah's squad to occupy, and they got their first real look at the interior of Rysgah City, much of it in deep morning shadow from the high rim of the extinct volcano's walls. The geographical conditions had dictated where the tunnel could be dug in such a short time and it was hardly the most advantageous tactical position, opening out onto a line of crumbling black and grey stone buildings thirty metres across from the outer circumference wall.

Several heavy weapons nests were located on the buildings' parapets and roofs, but many of them were little more than smouldering ruins, having attracted the fire of Third Platoon which currently busied itself with the hastily formed barricades to the left and right of their position. Fire still came from positions built into the towering, striated volcanic interior walls above and behind them, but the continual curve of the crater around the outside of the city and its buildings offered some protection for the moment. As soon as a few upper storeys disappeared, though, they'd be entirely exposed from just about every angle.

An explosion tore into the rockface on their right, showering black pumice over the dead Elysians at their feet. Coarto levelled his launcher and fired off a grenade towards a second-storey window to the left, blasting a huge hole and removing the threat in a shower of glass and brick. With no other fire returning, Zachariah patted the backs of the first three and they ran for the opposite side of the wide road, dodging stray fire until they made it to the relative safety of the buildings' rough stone walls.

Zachariah trained his scope in a swift 180-degree arc: it looked clear enough so, in a half-crouch, he led Adullam and Beor across the rubble-strewn cobbled road. Catching his breath, he beckoned over to the ten remaining support Guardsmen who wasted no time in joining them.

'Alpha team will—' Zachariah's words were drowned out by a high-pitched squeal of feedback from somewhere above, then the voice returned.

'Give up, hopeless ones! You all will perish at the hands of Chaos. Surrender while you can!'

Zachariah flicked a glance over to Sojack and nodded his head upwards. Raising his grenade launcher with a grin, Sojack stepped away and into the road without a second's thought of potential danger. Quickly scanning the roof-line, he spotted the oversized vox amplifier and fired off a single shot into the air.

The second he returned, the wall shook and debris rained down onto the road in front of them. The voice couldn't be heard any more.

'That's what you get for opening your mouth when you shouldn't.' The others laughed weakly at Coarto's joke, but there was no time for levity as Zachariah continued his instructions.

'As I was saying... Alpha team will hit their objective in fifteen minutes. We've got ten to get to ours. It's the smallest bridge but it's bound to be heavily defended and it won't take the Rysgahans long to figure out what we're doing. We'll head through the streets as planned but keep low and to the walls. This side of the chasm's still crawling with the enemy.'

With a nod of the head, five of the Guardsmen filed towards a narrow gap between the shattered buildings as First and Second Platoon emerged from the tunnel exit across the road, respectfully avoiding the dead as best they could and joining the furious melees at the blazing roadblocks to the left and right.

Despite the loss of life Zachariah could see they were making headway on both flanks and, if all went according to plan, they'd pincer out and around this part of the capital and have it under control within half an hour. They only needed to destroy two of the three bridges that linked the uneven sides of the city, divided as it was by a gaping crevasse that dropped down into the extinct throat of the volcano. With only one crossing point for rebel reinforcements to use, they'd soon be able to control and ultimately capture the opposite side – since only one of the three was cramped by restrictive architecture that would hamper larger troop movements at either side, there was no doubt which it would be.

The towering form of Melnis followed the first group of Guardsmen and squeezed his way through the gap into a nearby alleyway formed by the six-storey buildings, again cursing the lack of space but more than comforted by the massive

firepower in his hands. Coarto and Adullam followed next, then Beor who had his own issues with the passageway's width.

Zachariah used his scope to sweep the high ledges as they jogged along, but the lack of good quality light made it difficult to see anything in detail. He could hear Sojack talking to the remaining Guardsmen behind, telling them to keep tight and watch out for anyone doubling back on them. He'd make a good sergeant one day, thought Zachariah.

Penned in as they were, they would have been an easy kill for any Rysgahan traitor who'd spied their position, but luck was with them as they spilled out of the passage into a wide courtyard.

Unfortunately, it didn't last.

Fire erupted from all sides of the square, creating a furious crossfire that thumped into the leading group of Guardsmen. Two fell without even raising their lasguns. The third and fourth only managed to squeeze off a couple of wild shots before they, too, were cut down, and had it not been for Melnis's lethal aim with the plasma gun, they might all have suffered the same fate. His deadly arcing swing completely destroyed three rebel positions, with a withering torrent of grenades from Coarto providing able assistance. Without even being asked, Sojack threw over a couple of shells to Coarto, who immediately loaded them into his weapon.

The light was improving all the time, but the view that presented itself was best left to the darkness. The area had been used for some form of execution, as evidenced by the piles of bodies, their hands tied behind their backs, lying in broken heaps at the base of a smashed statue. Melnis immediately recognised the carven figure's desecrated remains.

'De Haan,' he rumbled dangerously.

Sojack reverently picked up the crumbling head of the martyred inquisitor's statue, seeing the rest of its parts deliberately scattered between the corpses in a vile imitation of the man's original, grisly end at the hands of Chaos worshippers. Adullam spat with disgust on the ashen ground and Beor whispered a prayer.

Zachariah watched the Guardsmen carefully. This kind of sight was hard enough for veterans to stomach, but younger, less experienced troops could find themselves distracted enough to get themselves – and others – killed.

‘Elysians, fall in.’ Zachariah didn’t raise his voice, but he didn’t need to. The remaining six men snapped to, their minds suddenly focused on the frowning face and dark green eyes staring coolly at them.

‘You see this? This is Chaos. You’ve heard of it, you’ve been briefed about it, but now you’ve experienced it. This is how they treat their own, so think of what they’ll do to you.’ One man gulped; another shook his head as he clenched his teeth together. They understood the lesson.

‘Now, I don’t want to lose another man today. Three streets down is the chasm. They’re waiting for us, so get ready to fight for your lives.’

He looked at the smashed figurine, violated and broken in the gloomy shadows.

‘For your Emperor.’

Adullam gave the young men a frightening grin, while Melnis patted one of them on the back so hard he nearly collapsed. Satisfied everyone was suitably motivated, Zachariah nodded towards a wide avenue lined with more tall, decrepit dark buildings and the team jogged its way along the pavement, shielded from the inner volcanic wall emplacements by the looming constructions more by fortune than planning.

The renewed wailing of the infuriating Rysgahan propaganda machine told Zachariah they were getting close to their target. Raising a clenched fist to stop the small column, he pulled out the data-slate that contained the map he’d downloaded during the briefing on the Obliteration and calculated where the avenue would bisect the main road running alongside the volcanic fissure. He saw at once that it would bring them straight into the line of fire from the bridge’s entrance, but there was a narrower street running parallel with this one that could be reached down an alleyway some distance ahead. Unfortunately, that street would only bring them closer to the same position with the added disadvantage of

being squeezed together on exit, much like the tunnel they'd used to enter the city.

Zachariah's options abruptly decreased, as a sudden blast thumped into them and the middle of the deserted street's surface erupted brick and stone in every direction. Huddling towards the wall with their faces turned away, the team were showered with debris as the ground shook from further detonations.

'Get into that street up on the left! Move!'

The air turned black with rubble and dust as shells rained down from seemingly every direction. They'd clearly been spotted from a higher position and the enemy were zeroing in with alarming speed. Squeezing into yet another tight alleyway, the panting men found themselves faced with a line of heavily fortified back doors, clearly some form of emergency access for the buildings lining the crevasse. Explosions ripped apart the roofs high above and while it would take a lucky shot to drop a shell straight down on top of them, even one such hit would wipe them out in a heartbeat. Melnis's frustration boiled over.

'Let me go and sort this out, sarge. By the Emperor, we're stuck like rats! I'm not dying like this.'

Sojack's reply had the edge of calm needed in such a situation. 'Cool it, Melnis. Why don't you take it out of that door right in front of you? Pretend it's mouth almighty over there.'

Coarto laughed at his friend's suggestion, and Zachariah nodded a confirmation – they couldn't go back or around, so they needed to go through the building to reach their target. Melnis didn't even bother to level his weapon; one brief but mighty kick splintered the heavy door like matchwood.

Piling into the gloomy interior, they found the ransacked remains of a bakery. From the shop's filthy front windows, the dark ragged slash that formed the volcanic chasm could be seen along with the bridge's entrance. Any thoughts of a surprise attack were lost when they spied half a dozen rebels moving cautiously forwards towards their position, while another six ducked and ran towards the far avenue from their hastily erected barricade. They were heading

for the very passageway through which the Elysians had just entered; within minutes they'd be surrounded.

The front windows shattered in a volley of fire, showering glass and brick into the murky interior. Some protection was offered by the large ovens and mixing vats, but it wouldn't be enough when the rearguard attacked and besides, given time, the artillery could simply level the building. They had to go on the offensive.

'Sojack, Coarto – make a hole out there. Melnis, Adullam – go see to our friends creeping around the back. You six – get ready to move on the bridge.'

Brief nods and grins from his trusted comrades lifted Zachariah's spirits. How many times had he come out of a tight spot with these men at his back? He stood back with the sweating Beor as Melnis muscled his way past, his weapon trained straight ahead and looking like a child's toy in his massive arms. Adullam couldn't see anything in front of him other than Melnis's huge bulk, but it wasn't the first time he'd been more than happy to use his friend as a living shield; something that had been the point of several jokes and, occasionally, fights between them.

Within seconds, battle commenced in the narrow corridor at the back, giving Sojack and Coarto their cue to move forwards through the gloom and deliver a barrage of grenades out of the shattered bakery's gaping frontage. Years of teamwork showed as they executed a textbook dual-launcher attack, one firing just within the explosive killing radius of the other to create a line of devastation that engulfed the hapless Rysgahans and probed its way spectacularly towards the bridgehead. They didn't even have to look at each other, such was their familiarity; they knew exactly what the other was doing.

All thoughts of the square put behind them, the six Elysian Guardsmen laid impressive supporting fire, carefully picking their targets as they advanced towards the ornate black ironwork of the bridge.

Moving into the street, Zachariah spotted two rebels wheeling a small cannon up to their defensive line, a third following closely with ammunition. For a split second, Zachariah felt real panic – they were completely exposed and one well-placed shell could wipe out the majority of his forces.

Just as he drew breath to bark a warning, the artillery bombardment returned in force. But instead of shells raining down on them, the Rysgahan barricade erupted in a yellow and black blossom of friendly fire, handily killing the majority of the rebels and clearing a path for the Elysians to enter the wide, two-hundred-metre-long iron walkway across the bottomless ravine.

‘Sarge, did you see that! The Emperor loves the 158th!’

Coarto was laughing at their good fortune, and even Zachariah had to smile – this kind of mistake meant the rebels were panicking, despite the incessant drone coming from the ‘mouth of Chaos’ across the chasm. Even so, if someone with nerve and experience took control things could change very quickly, so Zachariah looked for a high vantage point behind and upwards.

It took seconds for Coarto and Sojack to finish off the remaining rebels, and the six Guardsmen quickly took up crouched positions on either side of the bridge’s entrance. Burning buildings and military equipment made it difficult to see what was happening on the other side of the crevasse, but a deadly concentration of fire straight down the bridge’s length had the team retreating to the relative safety of the raised black stone embankment running along the banks of the inky chasm.

Shafts of sunlight began to streak down over the volcano’s mouth, tinged blue by the still-active void shields and glinting off the tops of buildings on the far side of the city. This would improve the view for the spotters located within the interior walls so, as Melnis and Adullam appeared from around the corner, Zachariah signalled to activate helmet comms.

‘If we can’t get on the bridge we can’t destroy it. Adullam, Beor – get your charges ready. I’ll go up that tower next to the bakery with Sojack and Melnis – no arguments.’

This cut off Melnis’s protestations immediately; he’d have to live without charging head-first down the bridge. His sergeant clearly had a more subtle plan in mind.

‘We’re going to need a lot of firepower up there to cover you. No point in us calling reinforcements as they’ll be too busy and, besides, if the Rysgahans try sending anyone down that bridge we’ll kill them just as easily as they could us. We need to even things out a bit. Coarto – go tell the regulars you’ll be covering Adullam and Beor while they set the charges. Move on my signal. Understood?’

Nods all around; and, on a final raise of the eyebrows and exhalation, he crouch-ran over to the larger, more ornate structure adjoining the now-burning bakery, once some proud municipal building but now a pock-marked, brutalised shell. Melnis threw himself through the thick wooden doors, splintering them on their hinges, and within seconds the three-strong team were running up the staircase of the rectangular tower, the amplified Rysgahan voice louder and clearer as they clattered up the dusty wooden steps.

A trapdoor opened up onto the tower’s exposed roof and Zachariah was immediately relieved to see a chest-high stone wall forming its outer edge. The sheer size of Rysgah City meant they’d be out of range from the far walls, but the accuracy of the recent artillery fire meant someone had a good angle on them close by. This was confirmed in no uncertain terms as they came under immediate fire, a shot hitting Melnis in the thigh and bringing him to his knees in fury.

‘Emperor damn it!’ he spat, crawling to the nearest wall as beams lanced overhead, punching neat holes in the stone above his head. Zachariah watched the angle of fire carefully and, readying his rifle, took a deep breath and edged upwards until he could see over the ledge. He ducked down, counted and visualised the location in his mind to within three metres; then, shifting a little to the right, he sprang up and fired two shots in rapid succession.

The first killed the spotter, the second his sniper protection. It wouldn’t be the end of it, but it gave them some breathing space.

‘Sojack, load up and range the other side of the bridge. Give ’em a good shower. Melnis – can you stand to cover?’

Melnis put weight on his leg and winced, his lower thigh already wrapped in a bloody field dressing. Zachariah immediately knew how bad it was for the big

man to show any sign of discomfort, but like every Elysian veteran, he'd fought on with injuries as bad and worse.

Cautiously putting his head above the high ledge facing the fissure, Zachariah took a good look at Rysgah City's interior. Black and grey stone buildings squeezed within the volcano's towering walls, winding streets that, only days ago, would have been impossibly busy, brightly lit by the now-dead lamp posts and the buildings warm from the unlimited geothermal power deep below the city's surface. Now it was a smoking, shadowy hell-hole, dying right before him, only suitable for the darkness to occupy.

Not if they had anything to do with it.

Satisfied they'd bought a few minutes of calm, Zachariah waved down to Adullum, Beor and Coarto who, in turn, saluted back. With a nudge from Zachariah's boot, Sojack sprang to his feet, made a rough calculation to the other side of the rift and, despite the plumes of smoke hiding the Rysgahans' movements, loosed a salvo into the air from his weapon.

Three familiar crumps thudded out from the base of the burning buildings lining the opposite bank, accompanied by dim yellow blossoms of flame at the bridge's far entrance. The rattle of gunfire abruptly ceased, terminating the lethal hail ripping down the bridge but, unfortunately, not silencing the wailing, increasingly deranged Rysgahan broadcasts.

'Be one with us! Your fight is lost! The mouth of Chaos is the truth!'

'I swear, sarge, if I get my hands on that bloody traitor, I'll pull his head off.'

Melnis was getting really annoyed now, which didn't concern Zachariah unduly as it'd take his attention from his injury. What did worry him was the amount of movement towards the bridgehead on the far side, suggesting this was going to be a shorter respite than he'd hoped. Realising the same, Coarto didn't waste the opportunity of lobbing a grenade directly, if not blindly, straight back down the bridge and, with the six Guardsmen advancing and firing in a line, Adullam and Beor moved in behind them with their charges.

At least the Rysgahans wouldn't shell their own bridge – they needed it intact – but, unfortunately, they didn't feel the same way about the tower in which Zachariah and his two comrades stood. The building shook with a rapid flurry of explosions, knocking Melnis off-balance and sending him sprawling to the cold stone floor with a curse. A loud whistle had the three of them ducking instinctively, but the mortar shell sailed overhead and down into the gaping fissure below the bridge.

With a couple of near hits and a far miss, it wouldn't take long for the trajectory to be readjusted right on top of their heads, but this meant they had to be in line of sight somewhere relatively close. Zachariah calmly spoke into his comms unit. 'That came from behind. Sort it out, Sojack.'

Striding over to the opposing wall, Sojack had a view of uneven rooftops and occasional towers all the way back to the massive black striated sheet enclosing the city. The Rysgahan defence troopers weren't experienced soldiers, at least not by Elysian standards, so he looked for the most obvious launch point.

Within seconds, he spied the domes of helmets belonging to two crouched figures five hundred metres away and ten metres down, partially obscured behind a large ventilation duct on a narrow flat roof. With ammunition running low Sojack knew he had to make the shot count, and he did; the grenade sailed into the air and dropped right on top of their position, the roof of the building collapsing in on itself in a cloud of dust and filth.

Back on the other side of the tower, Melnis was upright once again and swivelling his plasma gun on its bipod along the bridge. The smoke was clearing at the far end, revealing dozens of rebels moving between a wide clearing directly opposite the bridge's entrance and the tall buildings. One structure in particular caught his eye and he grunted as he shifted position slightly to give him a partial view of a large metallic framework on a high rooftop one street behind, where suggestions of figures moved busily between a network of snaking cables.

'Listen to the voice of reason! The mouth of Chaos will never be silenced!'

Melnis clenched his teeth in pain, aimed deliberately high and squeezed the trigger. Super-heated plasma arced upwards and over the chasm, the jet losing

shape and form as it reached the structure but still destructive enough to blow up the parts he could see. The amplified voice abruptly stopped and Melnis barked a triumphant laugh; it was the transmitter.

Fire flickered out of his line of sight, and his day was made when a flaming rebel plunged from the rooftop to the avenue below. It was wishful thinking, but he very much hoped it was the 'mouth'.

'That shut you up.'

Zachariah shook his head with a faint smile. The sun was creeping higher over the huge volcanic walls now, the destruction far below bathed in the first good light of the day. Something glinted in the distance down the street formed by the buildings, and he brought his lasgun's scope back up with a frown. At exactly the same time, Coarto's voice crackled in his ear. It was a single, simple word, and absolutely the last thing he wanted hear:

Tanks.

The lead vehicle drifted into focus through the thinning smoke, partially obscured by a milling group of rebels running in a confused swarm. It was low and flat, with the suggestion of a turret on top – a battered and barely functioning Chimera, its armour dented and split. The turret array was clearly no threat, but its hull-mounted heavy flamer looked worryingly intact. It seemed to have difficulty traversing to the right, suggesting the left-hand tracks or the steering mechanism was damaged, and the snub muzzle of its primary weapon seemed to be fixed forwards. At the moment it couldn't quite bring the heavy flamer to bear but the driver was clearly intent on rectifying this.

Directly behind was an equally decrepit Leman Russ, its main gun missing but the port sponson cannon tracking menacingly. Partially obscured by the Chimera's laboured manoeuvres, it posed no real threat while the APC stayed forward, and Zachariah assumed it was at the back because it wasn't as battleworthy as the carrier. Even so, if that managed to get into place, it could wreak havoc over the chasm and into their part of the city.

Flicking his attention back to Adullam and Beor, he could see them working furiously on either side of the bridge, several silver discs now lined across its width and joined by red fuse wire. Beor took an opportunity to look up at precisely the moment the Chimera managed to turn enough to open fire.

Three of the Guardsmen became instant screaming torches as the flamer's lethal jet consumed them, parts of the bridge's ornate sidings melting away with the tremendous heat. The remaining three threw themselves to the ground on the right while Coarto fell to one knee and fired his final volley towards the front of the vehicle, blasting the road surface directly in front of the APC and causing it to pitch violently downwards into the smoking hole.

With restricted movement the heavy flamer couldn't elevate enough to target the Elysians from its new position, but Zachariah could see from Adullam and Beor's feverish movements that the demolition charges weren't ready. They needed minutes, not seconds.

Ordering Melnis and Sojack to keep the bridge's entrance as clear of rebels as possible, Zachariah rested his lasgun on to the tower's smashed ledge and regarded the straining, shaking vehicle carefully through his image intensifier.

It was reversing out of the hole, tracks chewing on the crater's shallow sides. The driver would be somewhere to the right, his head below the upper and lower section seam – precisely where a crack had developed at the corner of the viewing hatch, thanks to a number of popped rivets. Coarto's crater had helped open it up a little more on impact, and with the APC not taking its full weight evenly across the lower section, it parted a few centimetres with the strain of movement.

Zachariah only had one chance at this before the Chimera got back to road level and the gap closed itself under the sheer weight of the turret above. He forced himself to relax; the stock and grip of the lasgun became an extension of his body and thanks to the bipod, he was absolutely static, leaving him to concentrate on timing out the violent rocking motion of the vehicle. He took a breath.

Target moving backwards, forwards, swinging up. Elevation and range calculated. Best angle approaching, largest gap forming... now.

The shot darted through the impossibly small hole formed between the thick armour plates, slicing into the vehicle somewhere around the driver's seat. An extraordinary shot; one of his best for months, but self-congratulation wasn't in Zachariah's nature.

Even if it had been, the dismay he now felt would have quickly quashed his triumph as the APC kept on moving backwards, eventually righting itself with a grinding crunch. Its squat form loomed menacingly for a few seconds, like a predator deciding which prey to devour first, and Zachariah flicked his scope around the Chimera, urgently looking for another weak spot.

Suddenly, the carrier shuddered violently and began to spin wildly around its centre, mercilessly swiping away rebels using its bulk for cover. Tossed in a wide arc, some bounced off the front armour of the Lemman Russ while others sailed like thrown dolls into the chasm, their screams quickly fading in the warm morning air.

A final bellow from the Chimera's engines sent the hulking machine lurching forwards into the embankment, ploughing through a dozen more hapless Rysgahans and crushing several others. A few were pushed straight through the crevasse's raised wall and followed it down into the bottomless darkness.

Something registered in Zachariah's brain – he'd missed a critical change. What was–

The air exploded out of Zachariah's lungs as he hit the floor of the tower face-up. His ears sang and he found he couldn't focus properly; then he felt huge hands pull him to his feet from behind. The world spun and he pulled off his helmet, trying to shake his vision back to normality.

Melnis was shouting at him but all he could hear was a high-pitched tone, and within seconds he realised what had happened – the Lemman Russ had opened fire on them and hit the corner of the tower with its first shot. Sojack crouched to one side of the large ragged hole newly created in the wall, firing the last of his grenades over the chasm, but the tank was just out of range.

Leaning on Melnis, Zachariah retrieved his lasgun and staggered over to Sojack's position as a second shell hurtled overhead, exploding a hundred metres behind. Melnis pig-headedly stood in the middle of the gaping hole and tried to hit the tank, but his previous repeated firing had left the plasma gun dangerously overheated and it shut down, leaving the huge man bellowing in frustration.

Zachariah grabbed hold of Melnis's webbing and yanked him back out of the direct field of fire, throwing a warning look at the furious man as he stumbled past.

Down below, Adullam and Beor frantically tried to finish wiring up the munitions while Coarto and the remaining three Guardsmen shuffled backwards towards them, firing sporadically, their ammunition nearly exhausted. The Rysgahans were readying their counter-attack on the bridge, which would surely come the second they had dispatched the three Elysians in the tower.

His head finally clearing, Zachariah rammed on his helmet, grabbed Sojack's shoulder and pointed over to the roof's trapdoor. 'Get down there and give covering fire to the others. Keep out of sight as best you can and they might think we've been put out of action up here. I'm going to sort out that tank.'

With a nod, Sojack crawled over to the heavy wooden panel and heaved it open, allowing Melnis to squeeze his bulk into the opening before he, too, disappeared with a salute. Two seconds later, a shell hit the lower side of the tower, blasting a second hole in its heavy walls and collapsing the corner. The integrity of the building was failing and the Leman Russ crew now had Zachariah in their sights – one more shot to his position, possibly two, then they'd turn on the others.

Zachariah reached for a fresh power pack from his webbing, tapped it on his helmet to shake off any dirt it might have picked up in transit and slammed it home with a satisfying clunk. Taking a deep breath, he rolled onto his stomach, presenting as flat a profile as he could to the rebels – but breaking two golden rules of sniping by firing from a known and exposed position.

Time slowed. In his downward peripheral vision, Zachariah half-sensed, half saw the shape of Melnis limping across the avenue towards the entrance of the

bridge, pulling out his entirely non-regulation and, at this range at least, entirely useless shotgun from the open holster on his back. Sojack had ditched his grenade launcher and was already firing single shots from his lasgun at the chasm's far bank, the brilliant flashes flickering in the corner of Zachariah's eye. All this he was entirely aware of, but it didn't distract him from his primary focus – the sponson-mounted gun on the mangled port side of the tank. The muzzle's angle was pointing directly at Zachariah; they couldn't miss.

Zachariah smiled.

Hold breath. Wait. Exhale. Squeeze.

The lasgun threw a brilliant high-energy beam straight down the centre of the cannon's muzzle, meeting the nose of the shell as it started its way out of the cannon. Without realising it they'd given Zachariah an absolute gift, the kind of shot he'd hear others tell stories about achieving over too many drinks at a bar, and he smiled as the tank left the ground on the left-hand side. It flipped on its side, smoke hissing out of its cracked shell, and when the magazine ignited the vehicle spectacularly erupted. Rysgahans were flattened on three sides, the remaining windows in nearby buildings blew out and shrapnel hurtled in every direction.

If the devastation wreaked by his single shot was good in itself, the utter shock and confusion on the rebels' faces as they picked themselves up off the ground was even better. He'd bought Adullam and Beor the time they needed, and they were already using it.

'Unbelievable, Zach! Unbelievable! We're done – ten-second fuse starting now. Adullam out.'

Coarto took the lead in front of the three remaining Guardsmen, followed by the heavily panting Beor and Adullam, as Melnis and Sojack gave covering fire. A couple of Rysgahans ventured onto the bridge, clearly forced to try and disarm the charges squatting in a ragged line, but it was too late – the middle of the bridge was torn apart in a tremendous explosion, making Zachariah duck behind the remains of the tower's roof to avoid the shower of iron fragments and stone thrown into the air. While he was spared the ignominy of being directly caught in

his own successful detonation, the blast was clearly too much for the tower's severely weakened structure, which began to collapse around and below him.

He dived through the open trapdoor. Huge chunks of masonry bounced off his helmet and armoured shoulder pads as he half-ran, half-fell down the disintegrating stairs. Entire blocks of stone plunged down the stairwell's open centre and, with a deafening crash, a wall fell out into the street below.

Zachariah knew he wasn't going to make it to the ground floor and so threw himself out of the gaping hole, landing awkwardly on a pile of rubble that had fallen after the Lemman Russ's first shell. Luckily, his sturdy high-ankled drop-boots took much of the twisting strain and the padded sections of his jumpsuit cushioned his untidy fall onto the avenue just as Melnis limped over, supported by Sojack.

Shots still arced overhead but, with a second rumbling explosion filling the air around the unseen bend of the chasm, the Rysgahans must have known the game was up.

Two bridges destroyed, one under Elysian control. They had nowhere left to run.

The quarters assigned to Zachariah and his squad on the Obliteration were cramped, spartan and noisy, but the showers worked and they were only a short walk from the mess hall – more than what they needed. Sitting on the edge of his peeling metal bunk, Zachariah worked on his lasgun's sight mounting, gently coaxing it back into shape with a pair of pliers after his hasty exit from the crumbling tower. Sojack and Coarto could be heard laughing from the adjoining wash cubicle, their voices echoing around the low ceiling of the six-berth billet. Ignoring the tall tales of impossible deeds, Adullam lay on his bedroll opposite Zachariah's position, staring at nothing in particular.

Beor lumbered into the room from the corridor outside, reading a fresh mission update from the briefing room three decks above, his laboured breathing pushing his barrel chest out to the limits of his extra-large tunic.

‘Only took an hour to get the shield down after the second bridge blew. The rebels surrendered after two.’

Adullam stretched and yawned, pushing his feet off the edge of the bunk and regarding his filthy outspread toes.

‘I imagine the executions started shortly after. That group of commissars I passed looked like they were going to burst with excitement.’

Zachariah smiled to himself; the Commissariat had, indeed, turned up in force once the 158th had secured the situation, ready to dispense the Emperor’s justice – and rightly so. He’d be surprised if a single traitorous rebel survived the night. It would be swift and brutal, but entirely justified; it was a wonder that the Inquisition hadn’t taken an interest, yet.

Exactly what would happen to the civilian populace far down beneath the orbiting Obliteration was beyond him; the planet was still right in the path of the Chaos forces’ seemingly relentless advance through the Arx Gap, and there was no formalised militia or effective government for them to turn to. Mass evacuation was simply too problematic, as was leaving anything other than a token garrison for protection; but as all of those issues now fell to those of higher rank than him, he shrugged inwardly and turned to re-attaching the sight onto its newly repaired mounting.

Beor looked up from the report, his interest lost now their involvement was over. ‘Any word on Melnis? Are they going to whip the leg off? Imagine what a pain in the arse he’d be with an augmetic one!’

Zachariah had seen Melnis an hour previously in the over-crowded charnel house that passed as the Obliteration’s infirmary. It’d been a lucky escape; while the wound was deep and he’d lost quite a bit of blood, a centimetre to the left and he wouldn’t have got off the planet alive. Not that any of this made the hulking brute any happier; after he’d shouted at the third orderly to get him back on his feet and signed fit for duty, a passing doctor administered a tranq dosage large enough to drop a bull grox and he’d likely be asleep for the following week if they were lucky.

‘He’ll be fine after some rest. Whatever that is.’ Adullam arched his back, the muscles cracking as he regarded a blue-black bruise on his shin. Beor rested himself slowly onto his bunk in the far corner, sighing deeply.

‘Don’t know about you two, but I’m sick of it out here. I can’t wait to get back home. A nice bit of ship-to-ship with some Elysian pirates – now that’s what I call...’

Zachariah was a master of self-control; he had the ability to slow down his pulse at will, reduce his breathing to a shallow whisper, remain completely still in the middle of an explosive maelstrom, but there was one, and only one thing that punched through all of his defences like no other. Any newcomer to the squad would have thought Beor’s comment had gone unheard by the veteran sergeant, but Adullam knew his friend far too well to miss the signs of his anger. The knuckles on his right hand had blanched, blood suddenly restricted by the vice-like grip currently transferred to the screwdriver being used on his lasgun.

It was at that exact moment Beor realised he’d said the wrong thing and met Adullam’s fiery glance; even the singing stopped from Sojack and Coarto in the shower. Everyone knew you didn’t talk about back home to Zachariah.

‘Sarge, I–’

Beor’s apology died in his throat as the tall, rangy form of Captain Makarah, a young but very effective officer from Third Platoon, appeared in the doorway. His darting glance finally rested on Zachariah, who looked up to meet his gaze with a neutral face. Adullam shook his head; he honestly didn’t know how his sergeant did it.

‘Sergeant, we need you in the briefing room right now. There’s a very nasty situation developed on Ophel Minoris – we’re nearest, so it’s up to us to sort it out.’

Placing his lasgun carefully on his bed and replacing his screwdriver on his opened repair kit roll, Zachariah rose to his feet and zipped up his jumpsuit. Without a word, he followed the captain out into the narrow corridor and disappeared from view, leaving Adullam and Beor in silence.

Adullam snorted air through his nose and, reaching under his bunk, pulled out his own lasgun. Beor followed suit, and shortly the only sounds that could be heard echoing off the thick metal bulkheads were the clinks and clacks of parts being dismantled, checked and cleaned.