

WARHAMMER 40,000



ASTRA MILITARUM MONOLITH

CHRIS DOWS



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'I repeat – this is Colour Sergeant Pedahzur of the Cadian 46th. Traitor Space Marines equipped with jump packs have overrun our position. We cannot offer any covering fire or assistance. We need reinforcements. Now!'

Despite the rattling din of equipment and weapons, the colour sergeant's voice was clear enough through Zachariah's vox. It wasn't panic in the Cadian's tone, but the urgency of his delivery said it all – this was going to be a tough one.

The briefing on the *Obliteration* had informed them that intelligence was 'incomplete', but it was clear enough that the situation had deteriorated.

Somewhere below, on the surface of Ophel Minoris, the Cadians had lost control of an installation vital to security in the Arx Gap – a massive structure of unknown origin with, it was said, similar properties to the famed Cadian Pylons. With their experience of these mysterious structures, the Cadian forces had been the obvious choice to occupy and defend them.

When the first distress call had come, the *Obliteration* had been the closest Imperial vessel, but it had still taken nearly a week to reach Ophel Minoris. Surviving an attack for so long under normal circumstances would have been a tough call for Cadians, who were amongst the hardest fighters Zachariah had ever met. It was apparent these were far from normal circumstances, and if any had survived against a foe of such

terrifying myth and legend then this only increased his admiration for them.

‘Chaos Space Marines... Emperor’s Throne,’ muttered Adullam.

Over the years Zachariah had heard whispers about these dreadful creatures. Space Marines who had rebelled against the Imperium and turned to the worship of dark powers.

He felt Beor shift uncomfortably in his seat, tightly wedged into the meshed metal bench he currently shared with the hulking brute to his left and Adullam to his right. Directly in front, the three troopers’ heavy boots almost touched the feet of veteran Guardsmen Sojack, Melnis and Coarto, the other half of Zachariah’s team, who sat quietly, conserving their energy for the mission. Their thoughts were drowned out by the roar of the Valkyrie’s twin engines as they hit the upper atmosphere.

Zachariah nodded once, and within seconds respirators were connected to helmets and tinted visors flicked over eyes, each man moving expertly inside the straps and harnesses holding him in place against the violent shaking of the ship.

‘Drop point in two minutes. All ships are holding formation. Clear skies, Elysians – we’ll get you down in one piece.’

The voice of the Valkyrie’s copilot warbled with the buffeting of the plunging ship and Zachariah acknowledged the message. Signalling his team to keep vox silence, he knew the other five squads somewhere behind them would do the same; comms would likely be monitored by the enemy and the last thing they needed was to give away their pitifully small numbers.

It bothered Zachariah that they had been sent in with such little preparation and, for that matter, recuperation after the fighting on Rysgah, but they’d been assured that reinforcements would join his beloved 158th as fast as they could. Whether it would be fast enough was immaterial; they had a job to do, and despite his many years of service he still felt a flutter of excitement in his stomach.

Slipping off the restraints from his shoulders, Zachariah reached below the bench and retrieved his grav-chute by its battered nozzles and heaved it off the deck. Sitting forwards, Adullam and Beor took a side of the pack each and lifted it up and over Zachariah’s head. He put his arms through the straps and began clipping them together. Leaning forwards to create

more space, Adullam and Beor followed the same practised routine until all three were ready for the drop. Within seconds, Coarto, Sojack and Melnis had done the same. This was always the most uncomfortable part of any mission, trying not to clang and crash into everyone and the bulky weapons containers taking up the rest of the drop ship's interior before making the way to the exit hatch. It was the very reason the veteran squad waited until the last minute of a drop, as well as one of a thousand things they had learned over countless missions.

Wham.

Zachariah looked sharply to the starboard side of the hold. He knew the normal clatter of orbital entry and that wasn't it. Something had hit them, and hit them hard, brutally illustrated by a dent in the grey metal wall. A frantic shriek of metal on metal filled the hold, choreographing the movement of the six men as they writhed to free their strapped-down weapons.

A sliver of light became a ragged, gaping hole as two sets of razor-sharp talons punched inside, and the Valkyrie's pressure warning alarm blared into life. A bulky bronze and scarlet figure gripped onto the entrance it had brutally torn open and stared impassively at the men. Buckles popped, webbing slid back and straps loosened, but it was all too late.

The creature screamed.

A fist of sound hit the men, smashing their senses into submission. Ducking down, the armoured monster launched itself inside, slashing talons cutting furiously through the racks and webbing. The ship lurched to one side, throwing the intruder towards Melnis, Coarto and Sojack, who were eviscerated in a scarlet flurry before Zachariah's eyes. Facing the three remaining troopers, the massive figure raised a powered arm, but its swing was unbalanced by the Valkyrie, which shuddered violently and dropped.

The shrieking Chaos Space Marine was thrown up onto the ceiling with a crunch, silencing its mind-splitting howl with the impact. The ship spiralled to starboard, throwing the traitor along the ceiling then back out of the hole it had made, taking a good part of the fuselage with it. Their reprieve was short-lived as Zachariah watched a fracture line run up and across the top of the hold, and with a mighty crack the vessel split in half.

In a blink, Zachariah found himself in free space, still strapped to the bench between Beor and Adullam. Experience overtook shock as the freezing air cleared his head, and he began assessing how to free himself from the plunging rack. Pieces of the Valkyrie fell past: an angled wing section, torn plates of the container floor and the entire nose of the dismembered ship. Zachariah caught a whirling snapshot of the pilot and co-pilot clawing desperately at the jammed cockpit mechanism. Their escape would never come.

Pulling his legs sharply underneath the bench, Zachariah fought the sickening gravitational forces and withdrew his combat knife from its sheath. Three slashing cuts across his restraints and a hard kick against the seat sent him tumbling into space, closely followed by Beor and Adullam, who had followed his cue.

Zachariah threw out his arm to right himself with the horizon, sheathing and securing the weapon in a seamless movement. Spread-eagled to increase drag, the three men drifted into a classic fall position – just as a volley of bolts tore between them.

Zachariah looked around – the traitor was plunging towards their position, firing with little thought for accuracy. Adullam and Beor saw the threat and split out of formation to provide two smaller targets instead of a single large one. Zachariah twisted and turned his body, pulling in his arms and legs to increase his drop, but he knew he was an easy target. The option of hitting thrusters and returning fire was futile because any reduction in speed would make things even worse, and he couldn't free his chest-strapped lasgun without stabilising himself.

He was in real trouble.

The dark green blur of a Valkyrie filled his vision, its speed startling him nearly as much as the fierce, breathtaking push from its twin exhausts. In all the confusion he'd forgotten the other five ships of the attack group. The new arrival roared down to the falling foe. The hulking creature powered towards the approaching ship but was met with a searing lascannon discharge that lanced a perfect hole through its chest.

Well, at least they can be killed, thought Zachariah as he watched the Chaos Space Marine plunge to the ground with broiling gore spewing from its back. An after-image appeared of Melnis, Coarto and Sojack's horrified faces as they struggled in the Valkyrie and Zachariah shook his head to

free himself of the dreadful vision. That creature had taken half his team. Half his *friends*.

He would have to deal with that later.

Just before he plunged into the thick blankets of cloud directly below, two shapes moved from either side into his peripheral vision. Surrounded by vapour-heavy whiteness, he felt a strong double pat on the fluttering arm of his jump suit. Through streaks of mist and drizzle on his visor, he saw Adullam nod once.

Zachariah returned the greeting and, despite the comms risk, tapped twice on the side of his helmet.

‘We’re about three miles up. They won’t be able to see us in this, and once we get through it the remaining Valkyries should protect our backs. Keep an eye out for a landing spot when we—’

‘Sarge, look at *that*.’

At this height the ground far below was a suggestion of detail painted by swathes of parched black earth and lush green forest. They’d seen variations on the pattern a hundred times or more, but the colossal, towering black stone monolith thrusting up to meet them was astonishing in scale and brutality. It had to be at least a mile high, terminating in a roughly triangular base. As it rose into the air, the weather-worn, pockmarked and partially eroded outer walls corkscrewed into an ever-narrowing spiral towards its summit. Thousands of randomly distributed outcrops, ledges and entrances suggested themselves thanks to the yellow-white gleam from Ophel’s sun. That’s how it attacked us, thought Zachariah. It jumped from the platforms on the top.

Greater detail formed as they fell towards the structure’s peak. Perched impossibly on the apex was a series of massive cracked and broken angled stone pillars: two giant cupped hands cradling the network of makeshift Imperial structures comprising the Cadian command post. The whole thing rested on a triangular platform supported by metres-thick buttresses projecting from the structure’s narrowing sides directly below.

How it stayed in place was beyond Zachariah, and his attention was suddenly drawn to flashes of colour from inside and out, pieces of debris and larger objects being thrown down to the ground. His jaw clenched.

The objects were men.

Zachariah unclipped his modified sniper lasgun and brought the telescopic site up to his visor, fighting the buffeting wind as best he could. The shaking image confirmed what he had feared. Through clouds of smoke and tongues of flame, he could see his Cadian brothers fighting, desperately and in close quarters. The crackle of static in his ear was replaced by the breathless, urgent voice of Pedahzur. They were close enough to pick up his short-range vox.

‘Regroup on the left of the – the left! Oranis, watch out for–’

A huge explosion ripped out the far side of the listening post, its prefabricated plasteel walls spinning out and down the steeple-angled black rock parapets. Screams could be heard over the open vox, cries of fury and agony as Pedahzur’s men fought the traitors to the bitter end. At such close range, it would be a massacre.

As if to confirm this, Zachariah’s razor-sharp gaze was attracted to movement within a ragged hole as he passed: a dozen men, perhaps more, backing out and firing repeatedly into the orange-black smoke. Despite unleashing withering fire, their unseen target kept at them until, inevitably, they tumbled off the ledge and fell to their deaths. Over a mile up, only a few would see out their doom to its bone-smashing end.

Zachariah’s scope bloomed with a brilliant flash from above. Instinctively he snapped it away from his eye, but blobs of colour punctured his sight with every blink. He felt something searingly hot streak past, and his vision cleared enough to see the burning remains of two disintegrating Valkyries cascading out towards him in a lethal curve. The reason for their brutal demise became clear some seconds later when another pair of Valkyries turned and climbed upwards and away from each other in the distance as two Chaos Space Marines descended towards them.

‘No!’ shouted Zachariah uselessly as one pilot made the dreadful mistake of opening the hold door, clearly thinking it best to disgorge his precious cargo before it became victim to the traitor’s frenzied attack. The six Elysian men presented instant targets on their exit, such was the proximity of the rust-red streak of fury to their fragile hold. They died within seconds.

Despite its own relentless pursuer, the second Valkyrie swooped around to help its brother, whose port fin stabiliser had melted away. The traitor

was torn into bloody confetti, but its crippled victim spun out of control towards its would-be saviour.

The second pilot pulled up and away, but it was too late; the Valkyries smashed into each other, creating a tangled mess of engines and fuselage that spun furiously past Zachariah and the others to the ground.

Zachariah looked in all directions, but he could only see empty space. Worryingly, the two other creatures were nowhere to be seen.

‘Head for that large outcrop at eleven o’clock. I’ll be damned if I lose all of you in one day. Move!’

The three remaining Elysians dipped heads, pressed their arms to their sides and pitched downwards at Zachariah’s barked order, arrowing towards the scarred and pitted wall of the monolith. Streaks of weapons fire flashed past from above, forcing another break of formation.

Zachariah twisted to try and find their attackers; the two monsters who had met the Valkyries were gaining on the Elysians, smoke belching from the underside of their massive jump packs. They must have landed then immediately launched, and Zachariah’s innate calculus told him they would intercept seconds before the Guardsmen reached the safety of the structure – unless he did something about it.

Tilting his body upwards, Zachariah hit his port thruster a fraction before the starboard, spinning him on his vertical axis, halting his fall with a sickening jolt. The renegades roared on, unphased by this impudent human wretch levelling its feeble weapon at them, revelling in the midair carnage they were generating.

Breathing deeply to correct his aim, Zachariah fired repeatedly at the lead traitor’s oncoming form, hoping to strike a vulnerable spot. The creature shook off the insect bites, but Zachariah kept on relentlessly, determined to buy the extra time Beor and Adullam needed. Somewhere inside the hideously decorated armour, he supposed the creature was laughing at his pathetic efforts as its own fire crept ever closer, but a flash of metal directly above had Elysian and traitor looking up as one.

The final Valkyrie was belching smoke from its port engine. A good part of the starboard wingtip was missing, but its multi-laser was still functional. Wildly inaccurate fire spat from the weapon, forcing the two monsters to break off their attack on Zachariah. Turning to the crippled

ship, they fired into the cockpit, quickly reducing it to glass and steel splinters.

With the pilot certainly dead and the rear hatch gaping open, Zachariah saw his chance and aimed at the vessel's underside. He struggled to centre his aim on the remaining Hellstrike missile, sitting proud on its pylon, but with the third shot the ship erupted in a ball of flame, engulfing the nearest traitor and sending chunks of metal into the remaining creature's jump pack. One piece tore through the starboard nacelle, which disappeared in an oily bloom of brown and black smog, the port engine increasing its output to compensate.

Caught off-balance, the traitor flipped and rushed towards Zachariah, who cut thrusters and dropped out of the way. As he watched the hulking red form streak past, horror quickly replaced his relief. Despite its damage, his foe had found another target.

'Beor, above and behind. Peel off!'

Zachariah's warning was too late.

Beor seemed to fold in half around the Chaos Space Marine's armour, his back snapping from the sickening impact. Only just managing to avoid a collision himself, Adullam was consumed by the inky black plume marking the traitor's steep curving descent towards the enormous building. If the initial impact hadn't claimed Beor's life, the collision with the monolith's side made certain of it.

Zachariah watched in utter dismay as the trooper's smashed body fell away from the traitor's mangled form and down the side of the massive structure, all dignity lost as he bounced doll-like off protruding sills and ledges.

Adullam became a shadow as he fell towards a huge triangular opening several levels below, his grav-chute deploying perilously close to the rough black wall. Stray fire darted from the still-raging battle from the listening post directly above, and Zachariah reached to hit his own thrusters as several Cadian bodies were expelled in a ball of fire. Most were dead, their lifeless forms taking on unnatural poses as they spun through the freezing air. But one clearly had some life left as he kicked and grasped at nothingness, one hand clutching a piece of flapping cloth. Even from this distance, Zachariah knew it was torn from regimental colours. Could it be Pedahzur falling towards him?

The swoop was going to be tricky. Midair rescues were hard enough with two experienced Elysians, even if they had practised as both rescuer and rescued repeatedly. Catching a falling, untrained individual was far more difficult. The man had no idea he *could* be saved. Attempts at communication were pretty futile, as it was hard to hear a vox while you were screaming your lungs out. Besides, the colour sergeant's headset was trailing like a useless streamer around his neck.

Zachariah knew his thrusters had scant seconds of fuel left, so he would only get one attempt. Slowing his descent, the dead bodies passed in a ghoulish shower of khaki. The flailing Cadian plunged past as Zachariah's pack began sputtering its own death throes. Taking a deep breath, Zachariah made some last-minute calculations before making his descent.

Fleeting, hurtling moments passed and then Zachariah slammed into the man's side, his momentum and line of travel throwing both of them into the gaping hole and onto the cold, wet stone of the monolith's interior with a gasping thump.

The insistent stabbing pain across Pedahzur's right side told him he wasn't dead. What swam into view was hardly the stuff of the glorious afterlife either – this was no vision of the Emperor looking down at him benignly, ready to embrace him into the heavenly fold. The face was filthy and bloodied, criss-crossed with scars and with a sunken left cheek rapidly darkening into a purple bloom.

'He's coming to, sarge.'

A second figure moved into view, the uniform immediately recognisable. Elysians.

'Colour Sergeant Pedahzur?'

He nodded once, then tried lifting himself up. Searing heat coursed across his right arm and chest, and he dropped back onto the unyielding stone floor.

'I'm Sergeant Zachariah, this is Guardsman Adullam. Your shoulder's dislocated. I can fix it if you like, but it'll hurt like hell.'

Zachariah's matter-of-fact tone might have sounded callous to some, but Pedahzur appreciated straight talking. Adding the fact that the Elysian had just saved his life, the colour sergeant liked him already.

‘It already hurts like hell. Do what you have to.’

Zachariah nodded to Adullam, who retrieved a handful of field dressings from their discarded packs. Wrapping them into a roll, he tossed it over to his kneeling sergeant who carefully placed the soft material in the crook of Pedahzur’s injured arm, directly below his dented shoulder plate. Shuffling around on the black rock, Zachariah positioned himself astride the Cadian’s now outstretched arm and grabbed the man’s wrist between his gloved hands.

‘I’m going to push my boot against the padding while I pull. Are you ready?’

Zachariah leant back, pulled and then rotated the wrist slightly. Gauging it perfectly, he increased the pressure and was rewarded with a loud, wet *pop* from inside the shaking man’s tunic. Pedahzur slumped in immediate relief. Only then did he register that he still had a hold on the torn cloth in his other hand. He looked down at the precious material.

‘What are we up against, colour sergeant?’ asked Zachariah.

Pedahzur took a deep breath then gingerly brought himself to a sitting position. The pain hadn’t disappeared completely, but it wasn’t debilitating either. Tucking the colours into his tunic, he reached out his left arm to Adullam, who stooped down and pulled him to his feet. His back was wet from a cold sweat and lying on the slick floor. The Cadian did his best to smarten himself up, but knew he looked exactly like he’d just fallen off a building and been thrown back in on the way down.

‘The traitors came from nowhere six days ago. They hit the ground level garrison and the command post at the same time. It took us three days to destroy their air support, but most of our forces were wiped out doing it.’

Pedahzur retrieved his laspistol from the ground, inspected it momentarily, then holstered it as Zachariah pointed two fingers to his eyes then over to the triangular entrance through which they had all plunged minutes before. Adullam moved towards it. Pedahzur could see that the sky was beginning to turn orange as the sun moved lower on the horizon, the wind whistling in from outside.

Zachariah continued with his questioning.

‘What’s their strength now? And what are they up to?’

Pedahzur took a closer look around the massive cave-like level on which they’d landed. Squinting into the darkness, he moved his injured arm

gingerly backwards and forwards to ease life into it.

‘Strength unknown, although there weren’t that many to start with. I’d guess a few dozen. As for what they’re up to... They’re going to blow the top off this structure.’

Adullam threw a look over to Zachariah and frowned. ‘Why?’ he asked.

‘This place isn’t the same as our pylons, but the general consensus is that it’s similar. We’ve had tech-priests here for years doing various tests, but I don’t think they’re any closer to figuring out this monolith than they are the ones on Cadia.’

Pedahzur grimaced and corrected himself.

‘*Were* any closer. They’re all dead now.’

Zachariah exhaled, unbuttoned his canteen and offered it to Pedahzur, who took a couple of gulps then handed it back with a grateful nod.

‘I was in the command post up top when they cut us off from below. They used our own network of gantries and the scaffolding we’d built up over the years to reach us once they figured out we were dug in well enough to fend off jump pack assaults. Hitting us from the air and from below was just too much.’ Pedahzur gritted his teeth, more from recollection than from physical pain. ‘Too much.’

The Cadian looked to the high vaulted ceiling, greater detail coming into view as his eyes adjusted to the gloom.

‘Just before we lost it up there, I saw a lot of fyceline being hauled up by a couple of the Raptors.’

Zachariah cradled his lasgun lightly in his arms and frowned. ‘Is that what they’re called?’

Pedahzur looked back down and met the gaze of the Elysian. Of course. He wouldn’t even know what it was that had attacked him. ‘My captain knew what they were the second he saw them. He’d fought one before on another campaign, and lost most of his men bringing it down. The Chaos Raptors are amongst the worst of the traitors and if they’ve been sent here, it’s to do something very important as quickly as possible.’

Zachariah looked over to Adullam who nodded in agreement. Stories had turned to reality, and a grim reality it was proving to be. The veteran sergeant looked back to the Cadian.

‘Reinforcements are on their way, but they’re going to take time which we don’t have. No point in heading down to ground level – there’s no one

left to help us. The Raptors will be putting charges into every possible nook and cranny. The captain also said the tech-priests believe this place will only work if it's intact, particularly the temple on the summit.'

Zachariah raised his eyebrows at the description.

'Temple? You mean those stone pillars?'

The colour sergeant nodded, a half-smile on his lips.

'That's what we called it. Seemed fitting, with its shape and location. Whatever it is, the traitors' mission seems to be its destruction so that's reason enough to stop them.' He rested his hand over the cloth tucked into his tunic. 'What's more, they've got my colours.'

Zachariah saw the pain and anger in Pedahzur's eyes. That, more than anything, would be playing on his mind. Before he had time to respond, Adullam shouted from his vantage point.

'Sarge, there's something—'

Adullam flew past the two men in a shower of rock and debris that caught Zachariah sideways. The remaining packs on Zachariah's back and shoulder armour took most of the explosion's force but he was still thrown to the ground, rolling to protect his precious rifle from a potentially damaging impact.

Within seconds he was in a defensive crouch. He could hear the groans from Adullam somewhere towards the centre of the chamber. The blast hadn't killed him, but any help would have to wait; silhouetted in the entranceway was the battered form of the Raptor he'd thought he had lost with Beor, its breath rasping laboriously in the gloom.

Whatever it had used to create the explosion heralding its appearance had been discarded. Staggering forwards, the abomination raised its bolt pistol in a shaking hand, steadying itself with a clenched fist on the angled rock wall. It fired wildly, pumping bolts towards the three prone men, but none found their target, giving Zachariah just the time he needed to bring the scope to his eye and activate the intensifier.

A speckled green image of the monstrosity flickered before him, the reticule brighter than the surrounding field which partially obscured the enhanced details of the Raptor's armour. He fired immediately, creating flashing blossoms of zero effect. The Raptor tried to summon a scream, but all that issued was a garbled, grating noise which made it stumble forwards with the effort.

The light changed imperceptibly but it was enough for Zachariah's acutely trained eye. He'd never seen a Chaos Raptor before, but the small crack in its elaborate mouth grille gave him more than he'd need for a shot. A bolt whistled past his shoulder and impacted somewhere far behind, showering rock to the floor of the cavern, but Zachariah was in his zone now, breathing slowly, the outside world blocked out.

He fired twice. The first shot deflected away, but the second disappeared into the vertical slots. The creature's head jerked backwards and it stood motionless for seconds until it pitched forwards, crashing face down. After the echoes had died in the massive room, the only sound was the loud ticking of the battered jump pack's casing which, Zachariah assumed, was down to it cooling in the dank air. Even so, he kept a healthy distance from the Chaos Raptor's hulking form. He snapped the intensifier off and walked over to his friend, who raised his eyebrows sardonically. Zachariah nodded. Lucky shot. Weakened target.

'Can you walk, Adullam?'

'I think I've broken a couple of ribs.' His battered face contorted with pain as Zachariah pulled him upright. 'Emperor's *Throne*, I have. At least two.'

'Get your jumpsuit off and I'll strap you up best I can. I'm guessing we've got a lot of climbing to do, Pedahzur?'

The Cadian rose unsteadily to his feet.

'That we have. I know which level we're on. We've got twenty to climb. Some have good staircases, but there's one that's going to be difficult. It'll leave us wide open too.'

Zachariah began rolling out a field bandage between his hands as Adullam painfully removed his bandoliers, webbing and various bits of kit. Retrieving his helmet, he flicked on its integrated image intensifier and the darkness of the cave's far side flickered into an eerie green glow. He could make out large, steep rockcrete and metal steps disappearing up into the vaulted stone ceiling thirty yards up, and a large triangular shaft in the floor and ceiling.

'At least we've got no issues with the darkness. We'll lead you through,' Adullam said.

Pedahzur laughed as he walked into the gloom.

‘I’ve been going up and down this bloody tower for nearly two years, sergeant. I could do it with my eyes closed, and have done before.’

Adullam looked to Zachariah with a frown as the bandages tightened around his ribs.

‘Fair enough.’

Despite every breath and movement being painful to Adullam, the first three levels were traversed with little incident. Remarkably, the traitors hadn’t raided the various weapons caches stored by the Cadians on every other level, so they weighed themselves down with as much ammunition and grenades as they could carry. They even found a compact missile launcher and, while it slowed them somewhat, they all felt comforted by their new acquisitions – particularly a short-range vox headset for Pedahzur, the old one having snapped off during his fall.

Despite having the ability to communicate, little was said and they fell into a silent, steady pace, their senses straining for the first sign of trouble. By the fourth level, the lack of resistance left them all feeling uneasy.

Pedahzur tried to recall how many Chaos Raptors he’d seen on the initial attack but still couldn’t reach a figure he felt comfortable sharing with the Elysians. Regardless of numbers, it was highly probable the traitors knew they were here and it was only a matter of time until an attack came.

While the floor space was decreasing with every level, the chambers were still massive, allowing them to avoid the huge, triangular shaft that ran upwards in the middle of the structure. Neither Cadian or Elysian had any idea what it was for, but they realised it was a long, fatal drop.

Coming to the base of a badly damaged staircase, Pedahzur beckoned them both to come within whispering earshot.

‘We’re heading into the final big chamber. It’s been crumbling away for decades so watch for bits falling off.’

He paused to wipe his heavily sweating face before continuing.

‘Like I said, it’s an absolute pain.’

The Elysians followed the colour sergeant up through the opening in the metres-thick solid rock floor. Zachariah looked up at the wall before him and took a breath. A series of metal gantries, plasteel tubes and ropes had been lashed together in ever-decreasing widths, zig-zagging up to the

triangular roof and a large ragged exit hole at the junction of the wall and the ceiling. This chamber was the biggest yet, and he noted the central shaft terminated on this floor.

Adullam exhaled more noisily than he'd wanted to, his shortness of breath difficult to conceal.

'Couldn't you have done a better job?'

Pedahzur threw Adullam a grim smile.

'The walls couldn't take a single staircase so we had to do it this way. Engineers had to drill through this level's ceiling, such is the unstable condition of the rock. It was originally separate to the last fifteen floors.'

Pedahzur gingerly placed his boot on the plates of the lowest platform, the whole walkway swinging and clanking as he began up its slippery surface. There was still enough light filtering in through a number of high triangular openings on all three sides, but he'd have to use the luminator he had retrieved from a supply cabinet a couple of floors below sooner rather than later.

Pulling himself along the rope guide with his free hand, he headed towards a flatter platform at the far end of the wall which, thanks to a stubby vertical ladder, connected to the next, shorter, upward-angled platform. He'd told Zachariah and Adullam to wait until he'd mounted the next level before following on, and ensure they traversed one person at a time. That'd spread them over three levels at the very least, and as there were a dozen stages to this ramshackle network and it would take them at least twenty minutes to cover it. He just hoped the Raptors were slow at positioning charges.

It was as Zachariah hauled himself up onto the fourth level that the world went green. Even though his helmet's intensifier had a safety system built into it, there was always a lag before it could adjust to rapid changes in light, so he was effectively blinded by the huge explosion that shook the room.

Rocks, tubes and girders rained down past Zachariah, who clung for dear life to the safety rope running on the outside of the precarious walkway. A high-pitched shriek built to a deafening howl, sending the veteran sergeant

to his knees on the bucking platform. His teeth felt as if they were being ground with a rasp file.

The Raptor's meltagun dissolved the bottom three walkways, causing Zachariah's level to pitch violently downwards. Losing his grasp on the rope, the Elysian slid uncontrollably towards the disconnected end of the gantry, watched by the traitor.

With its shrieking vox-caster still at full volume, the Raptor angled its weapon higher, vaporising a good part of the upper levels towards which Pedahzur was desperately trying to scramble. Glowing rockcrete rained down, the width of the platform directly above his head, diverting the lethal debris but still forcing him to duck away from blobs of molten metal.

With a roar of thrusters, the scarlet monstrosity fired up its jump pack and leaped towards the disintegrating network of ropes and metal, the flickering fire from its exhaust lighting up the cavernous interior of the chamber. Landing heavily on the near side of the gaping triangular shaft, it picked its way through stone and steel, staring up at Zachariah with an unflinching gaze.

'How dare you try to fight us in the skies?'

The creature's rage boomed around the unrelenting black walls, the force of its words causing chunks of stone to break loose and crash onto the floor or disappear down the shaft's gaping maw.

'We *rule* the skies! You are naught but prey, and a disappointing hunt at that.'

Zachariah's head spun, his body ached and he had no real idea exactly where he was, but the traitor's words cut through the mist like a white-hot knife. Old tricks he'd developed over years of bombardment and confusion played out: he forced his head clear, focus returned, and he found enough support on the safety rope's steel rods to push himself upright against the steeply angled metal floor. The Raptor took a couple of steps closer, mounting a large rock, its meltagun held almost casually within its huge spiked gauntlets. Another piece of black granite crashed within a metre of its position without causing it to so much as a twitch.

'We shall destroy this place and consume you all. There is nothing you can do against the glory of the Blood Disciples. Chaos shall reign!'

Zachariah brought the lasgun's scope up to his eye, but he didn't fire on the Raptor. Instead, he pointed the muzzle skywards and searched for the source of the falling rocks. Sure enough, he could see a fissure deep in the roof, a maze of cracks running from it in all directions. He pulled the trigger and fired repeatedly, aiming surgically precise shots into the weakened ceiling. The Raptor didn't even bother looking up, such was his arrogance and hubris.

'I will carve my name into your mortal body. Prepare for your death!'

The first chunk of rock to fall was barely a metre across, but it threw the Raptor off balance, smashing over its raised arms so that its meltagun's lethal super-heated blast ejecting wide of Zachariah's position. The second rock, however, was far larger and seemed to fall in slow motion, majestically gathering momentum until it piled onto the traitor's head.

The sound thundered around the chamber, dislodging yet more rock from the walls and ceiling. Such was the weight of the slab, the Raptor couldn't push it up and off. However, it could still move sideways and Zachariah realised it was only a matter of time until it prised itself free.

Strapping his rifle to his chest, the veteran sergeant threw himself towards the safety rope which was now trailing to the debris-strewn ground below, and rappelled down it in seconds. Grabbing a bandolier of frag grenades, he wrapped them tightly together as he ran, forming a large loop with the remains of the strap.

Before him, the huge slab was moving and he could see the arched projections of the Raptor's jump pack intakes; it was freeing itself faster than he'd hoped. Pulling the pin on one grenade, he threw the makeshift lasso towards the opening gap in the rocks and saw it rattle downwards into the makeshift tomb he'd formed around the Blood Disciple. A single grenade against power armour wouldn't do a great deal of damage, but half a dozen detonating in a concentrated area was something else.

This was a realisation evidently shared by the Raptor, whose movements suddenly became frantic. Zachariah turned and dashed towards the precariously dangling scaffolding, counting under his breath.

'Ten... Nine... Eight...'

Zachariah had once held the regimental record for rope-climbing, but that had been on the vast training grounds back on Elysia, without full armour and exhaustion. Even so, the threat of dying in a shower of rock

and Raptor shrapnel put urgency into his ascent. He continued his countdown as he climbed, until he had his hand on the crazily tilted platform. He was back where he'd started his attack, and prayed to the Emperor he was high and far enough away from the emerging form below.

‘One...’

The blasts threw the Raptor backwards towards the shaft, its left leg exploding into fragments and right leg completely dislocated from its socket. Screaming in pain and fury, the creature pulled itself along with its arms and tried to right itself, but it couldn't stand. Weapons fire lanced into it from above. Zachariah craned his head upwards but he couldn't see who was responsible.

‘Adullam... Pedahzur, come in.’

There was a crackle, then he heard the Cadian swearing to himself as he fired at the crawling Raptor below.

‘Adullam, respond. Adullam!’

Zachariah tried to keep the concern out of his voice but failed. Adullam had been in bad shape before the Raptor attack. He might be stuck somewhere above or, worse, buried below in a pile of rock. Regardless, the Raptor was still alive and, as such, still a threat.

Zachariah braced himself as best he could and aimed at the flailing abomination directly below. As the Raptor filled his scope, there was a brilliant bloom of light and the creature disappeared from view into the triangular hole. A few soft flickers of light suggested the creature was trying to ignite its jump pack but they faded to nothing as it plunged to its doom. Zachariah heard Adullam bark a laugh in his headset.

‘Sorry to worry you, sarge. I was too busy setting up this missile launcher to talk.’

Zachariah exhaled with relief.

‘Apology accepted, Guardsman. Now, let's get off this bloody death-trap’.

Pedahzur was the first to haul himself up through the ragged hole in the ceiling before half pushing and half pulling Adullam to safety, despite his pained curses and protestations. While they caught their breath, the remains of the gantry gave up what little integrity they had left and

collapsed. Pedahzur wiped his grimy face with a dust-covered sleeve, blood from numerous cuts and grazes streaking across his cheeks.

‘Not that we had any intention of leaving, but there goes our chance of going back down.’

Adullam doubled over with a coughing spasm and spat down towards the settling debris. All three moved towards the far corner of the dimly lit chamber and a sturdy looking set of ladders that disappeared into the relatively low ceiling.

‘The rooms get a lot smaller now until we hit the command post and temple,’ said Pedahzur. ‘If they haven’t sealed any of the entrances up, we should make good time. They probably assume we’re all dead after all that noise, so we *might* have surprise on our side.’

Zachariah and Adullam gave Pedahzur a raised eyebrow and a frown respectively, shouldered their lasguns and motioned for the Cadian to take point.

As they climbed, the ringing in Zachariah’s ears fell a tone as he screwed his eyes shut and worked his jaw. Despite the events of the last few hours, he felt very, very lucky.

Harking back to tales from the mess room, despite a soldier’s habit of exaggerating combat, he realised that to defeat even a single Space Marine was an extraordinary achievement, let alone two. That being said, the first had been crippled and the second had been in a less than ideal tactical position. He had no doubt that more than one in a confined space with a strong defence would make things very different.

The chambers approaching the apex were similar in configuration, save for the relative reduction in size, but as they came within two levels of the command post things changed dramatically. It started as a faint chemical smell that quickly escalated to an overpowering stench of burned flesh and promethium. Cautiously entering the chamber, it was brutally clear what had happened. Instead of sealing the floors below them, the traitors had dropped incendiary devices into whoever had been attempting to attack or retreat. Carbonised bodies and twisted metal formed distorted, hellish visions that might have come from the warp itself. Along with Pedahzur’s brothers in arms, the fires had also consumed all hopes of fresh ammunition.

They trod as respectfully as they could over the blackened, brittle bones of the Cadian 46th, the temperature rising from the heat still retained in the monolith's walls and floor. The two sets of connecting ladders had been fused together, but were intact enough for them to reach the second level, which revealed an equally dreadful scene. A sudden rumble had them readying weapons, but no attack came from within or above the small, ash-covered room in which they stood.

‘Something heavy being dragged?’ whispered Adullam.

The sound came again, now loud enough for the vibration to disturb the thick layers of soot coating the windowless walls. Without respirators they had to bury their faces into the crooks of their arms to muffle retching coughs, and Adullam doubled over in pain again.

After a few seconds it stopped, and the heavy thumping of power armour could be heard moving away. The Guardsmen closed on the large smashed hole forming the entrance to the floor above. Light from the brightly illuminated Cadian facility filtered through, enough for Zachariah and Adullam to deactivate the image intensifiers in their helmets. Ducking underneath the hole, Zachariah could see no shadows of movement directly above. Looking to the wall, the ladders had been melted away completely; regardless of how they got up there, if they were spotted emerging they'd be dead in an instant. Of all the places not to have darkness, thought Zachariah ruefully.

Their only hope was that the Raptors would be too consumed with their business to notice their arrival. Retrieving a rope lashed around Pedahzur, Zachariah fashioned a grappling hook and waited patiently for more movement. As soon as it came, he tossed the hook up and tugged sharply.

Pedahzur was first up the rope, gingerly poking his head above floor level to see if their presence had been detected. Wreckage strewn in all directions obscured his vision, and the slain bodies of his Cadian brothers lay everywhere. In places, the reinforced flooring that extended out to the finger-like columns had been punctured, and the air whistled noisily through a number of gaping cracks and holes. One of the three sides had been blown away, as had parts of the ancient outer temple supports once cradling it. Closer and to his right, fallen beams and conduits were all that remained of the once out-of-bounds tech-priest laboratory, their arcane equipment at the mercy of the darkening sky above.

There was no sign of the traitors, so he tapped his boots twice to the anxiously watching Adullam and Zachariah, who prepared to ascend. Pulling himself onto his stomach, Pedahzur crawled to a heap of rubble and carefully readied his lasgun to cover the entrance hole. The climb forced a gasp of pain from Adullam, thankfully unheard by the enemy.

He'd not taken a lot of notice when he'd scabbled to his position, but Pedahzur saw that one of the thick snaking cables he'd moved was a detonator cord – the Blood Disciples were close to blowing the place up. *Very* close.

Within seconds of Zachariah's arrival, all three moved towards the middle of the smashed command post. Its state made it difficult to gain an uninterrupted view of the heavily protected central core where the transmitter and other vital systems would be located, and Zachariah dropped to a crouch and signalled the other two to follow his lead as he spied the shadowy movements of at least three Raptors in the middle distance.

Kneeling behind a partially demolished briefing table, Zachariah shifted position until he could clearly see two traitors working in front of a long grey box balanced atop a blackened console. It had a series of thick cables and thinner wires terminating in rubberised plugs along its top. From his own experience of special weapons, he suspected it was a detonator in the final stages of preparation. A third, much more ornate, warrior joined them in the work. Zachariah signalled readiness to Adullam on his left and Pedahzur to his right. All three had shuffled themselves into a fair line of sight, and unless other Traitor Adeptus Astartes were busying themselves outside the structure, they had a target each.

As they steeled themselves for the attack, the elaborately suited abomination suddenly straightened and thumped around in front of the other two, looking directly at Zachariah's position.

'So... the prey returns.'

The voice dripped with contempt. The Raptor clearly saw them as posing no threat whatsoever and, as one, the two remaining Blood Disciples turned and moved to flank him. The abomination on the right spoke casually, dismissively. Wrapped around its left arm was some material: torn, dirty and ragged. They were Pedahzur's colours.

'Shall I destroy them, Shamhuth?'

Somewhere from inside the metallic red form, a laugh devoid of humour crackled forth.

‘We shall all take them, my brothers. We have no time for this distraction.’

The left Raptor charged towards Adullam who ducked out of the way behind a steel plate, but his improvised cover took the full force of a bolt at close range and propelled both the steel and the man through the weakened exterior wall. As the creature moved to finish his attack on Adullam, Zachariah targeted Shamhuth’s weapon and fired repeated controlled bursts, crippling the bolt pistol into uselessness. The third, flag-carrying Raptor emitted an amplified howl and lumbered directly towards Pedahzur who, to Zachariah’s utter astonishment, started running towards the scarlet-suited behemoth, screaming oaths about his colours being lost and firing crazily as he went.

The flag-bearing Raptor shared Zachariah’s amazement for a split second then, regaining its bloodlust, powered towards the Cadian, bolt pistol now swapped for a chainsword which rattled in anticipation of a fresh victim.

Pedahzur jiggled left behind a roof support, throwing himself towards a heap of bodies where he could see what looked like a missile launcher. It was damaged, but the firing mechanism seemed intact and there was a shell in the pipe ready to go. He hefted up the bulky tube. The Raptor was less than three metres away and nearly on him. At this range, Pedahzur didn’t even bother to aim – he pulled the trigger and the shell hit the Chaos Space Marine squarely in the chest. The blast shattered the creature, but at such close range, the shockwave hurled Pedahzur into the air. He never saw the fractured bulkhead strut that ended his life.

The same explosion rocked Shamhuth back on his heavily armoured feet and knocked Zachariah to the ground. Adullam’s attacker turned from his pursuit and screamed in fury at the loss of his brother, thundering towards the prone form of Zachariah. A Krak grenade diverted the Raptor rather than stopping it, and as debris rained down on him, Zachariah scrambled towards the outer temple structure and a narrow maintenance ledge that ran around the battered shell of the command post.

The freezing wind whipped around his body, chilling his exposed cheeks and mouth, but it wasn’t the cold Zachariah was concerned about. He’d

exited between a series of outer supports and there was no way he could bring his weapon to bear, even at close range, without losing his balance. He also couldn't make it to the pillars above and to his left without negotiating half a dozen stanchions and exposing himself to attack.

Adullam's attacker made no attempt to conceal its arrival from Zachariah. Ducking forwards, he peered around a thick vertical girder and saw an armoured foot clamping claws around the inspection ledge a few metres away, the sheer weight of its armour reducing the rockcrete to rubble. The creature's jump pack roared into life and Zachariah flattened himself back against the command post wall, squeezing behind another support positioned closer to the prefabricated structure.

A volley of bolts sailed past the Elysian, but the Raptor's angle of attack was as impeded as his own from this position. It was a stalemate the traitor legionary wasn't interested in maintaining. Zachariah felt the floor beneath him shatter from carefully aimed fire. Within seconds he'd be standing on thin air.

He looked again at the temple columns. He would never make it to their cover. The creature moved a little closer, still firing into the ledge, and a plan presented itself.

Grabbing a grenade, Zachariah pulled the pin and counted up to three seconds of detonation, before heaving himself onto the ledge and hurling it at the base of the nearest pillar. He didn't see the explosion, as he had to duck back to avoid a volley of bolts. Bellowing in frustration, the creature returned to its destruction of the ledge, causing a large chunk of floor to fall away.

A sharp crack filled the air, followed by the crashing of rock on metal. The firing stopped, and a scream of anger drowned out the whistling wind. Zachariah poked his head out and looked down to see the Blood Disciple disappearing from view. The grenade had done its job; his calculations had been correct. All he had to do now was work out—

A scarlet-armoured fist punctured the plating mere centimetres from his head. His instinctive turn away from the lightning-fast movement unbalanced him, pitching him into the rest of Shamhuth's massive arm. The creature grabbed the Elysian by his shoulder armour and yanked him back into the panelling with all its lethal might.

The air fled from Zachariah's lungs and he only just retained his balance by grabbing the stanchion he'd been hiding behind. The plating behind him was peeled away like the skin of a fruit and he could hear Shamhuth venting his fury on the structure. Once again a metal gauntlet took hold, this time around his neck.

Pulling him up, the traitor ripped Zachariah's helmet off and inspected his bruised and bloodied face as the Elysian gagged on the stranglehold. Perhaps it was some distant memory of familiarity, or a grudging respect for a prey that had managed to dispatch several of its brethren that caused the traitor to pause. Either way, the veteran sergeant thought there was only one real response to such a situation and, with a supreme effort, spat where he thought its eyes might be. With a roar the warped Space Marine held Zachariah out at arm's length, ready to drop him to his death.

'Put him down. *Now.*'

It was more of a croak than a shout, but both Elysian and Raptor heard just fine. Over the abomination's shoulder, Zachariah was astonished to see the battered form of Adullam, a meltagun trained shakily at Shamhuth's back. After the briefest pause, its head turned. The Raptor's words were spoken calmly and deliberately.

'As you wish.'

Zachariah was used to the sensation of falling. It was as familiar as eating and drinking, but this time it was without a grav chute – a recurring nightmare become reality. He saw the traitor's open hand ascending away from him and imagined rather than heard the scream of fury from Adullam as he fired the weapon at Shamhuth.

The Raptor launched its jump pack and managed to clear most of the shot, but the edge of the blast caught the right side of its shoulder armour and melted the starboard intake into a heap, spinning the creature at great speed past Zachariah's freefall.

The veteran sergeant's mounting panic fled, replaced by a whirl of calculations and adjustments. Shamhuth's port engine sputtered briefly then died in a trail of smoke. The Elysian flipped himself around in midair and pitched his body downwards. His eyes were streaming from the wind, and breathing was virtually impossible, but his aim was true. The Raptor's attempts to arrest his fall slowed his relative descent and within seconds

the abomination was in range, no more than half a mile above the sprawling surface of Ophel Minoris.

Zachariah hit the Raptor's smouldering armour around the waist, throwing them both into a spin. Shamhuth gave a grunt of surprise and flailed around, trying to swat Zachariah away. The traitor managed to catch him in the shoulder, sending him flying off into the air, but still falling at the same rate. Curling into a ball, Zachariah used every trick in the book to reposition himself, this time approaching from the Raptor's blind spot. He hit the jump pack hard, just as the one good engine roared into life.

Zachariah gripped onto the rounded lip of the remaining intake with his gloved fingertips, heat searing through his battered gloves. He would have to let go. The creature furiously turned its head from side to side, writhing and jerking its arms to throw him off. It was then that Zachariah glimpsed something – a melted hole in the armour between neck and helmet, doubtless caused by Adullam's shot. Holding on with a single hand, Zachariah reached for his final grenade. Releasing the pin, he thrust it into the gap and let go for a split second, grabbing onto the inactive starboard exhaust with charred fingers.

His hands were wrenched away by the force of the grenade's detonation inside Shamhuth's armour. Gobbets of flesh and shards of metal spewed in every direction, some slicing through Zachariah's arm and leg. The pain meant nothing to him. He was entirely focused on the now separated jump pack which, unencumbered by the huge weight of the Chaos Raptor, rose into the air. Grabbing hold with both burned hands and ignoring the agony, Zachariah held on.

The speed was extraordinary. His arms screamed with pain, and his head spun with the increased altitude and the violently shaking pack. He couldn't keep this up much longer. To his left the peak of the monolith came into view and the thrust increased, then stopped, the arc steepening into a drop. It wasn't a perfect projection, but it'd have to do; at the closest point to the structure, Zachariah let go as the now useless jump pack fell away.

It took a few seconds for Zachariah to make sense of what he was hearing. The first distorted voice sounded like the captain of the *Obliteration*, the second Adullam. Opening his eyes, he looked down to see his legs splinted together, one arm tied roughly to his body and both hands heavily bandaged. An empty syringe case next to his head explained why he felt no pain.

‘The threat *has* been neutralised. Just come and get us. There are two injured to pick up at the apex of the structure. Adullam out.’

Cursing under his breath, Adullam staggered to his feet from the communications station, tripping over a series of re-routed cables. Standing over his friend, his grin revealed three broken teeth.

‘Your left leg’s broken below the knee, left arm above the elbow and both hands are a complete mess. Other than that, you’re fine,’ he grunted. He broke into a racking cough and slumped down heavily onto a broken chair.

‘Do something for me, Adullam,’ muttered Zachariah.

The Guardsman raised a weary eyebrow.

‘What do you need?’

Zachariah lifted his head as much as he could. It felt impossibly heavy, as did his right hand as he pointed.

‘Lay Pedahzur down and cover him in his colours would you? One of the traitors had them.’ It was the least they could do for the Cadian.

Adullam looked into the gloom of the smashed command post, sighed, then back again to Zachariah.

‘Already done, sarge. Already done.’

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