



WARHAMMER
40,000

CHRIS DOWS
**SCIONS OF
ELYSIA**

SCIONS1 OF ELYSIA (2017)

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List of characters:

- * Zachariah – Sergeant of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Adullam – Veteran of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Lohm Bandrac – Captain of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Shendrick Mastroval – Commissar, Adullam’s interrogator;
- * Ollev, Tabrini, Stelldor, Subidan, Malda - 158th Elysian Drop Troopers;
- * Dewfalco - Lieutenant of the 217th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Vondrall - Lieutenant of the 267th Elysian drop troop unit.

Adullam: “Let me tell you about Zachariah. He is more than my comrade. He is my friend. I fought by his side in more battles than even you can imagine. His skill and sheer damn guts in dozen campaigns in a thousand lives including my own. All he cares for is the Emperor and his own men. He should be rewarded for what he’s done, not punished”.

In a high security bunker on the perimeter of the Elysian Drop Troopers’ training ground

D-64 Commissar Shendrick Mastroval eyed the veteran demolition specialist Adullam. Under normal circumstances he would have punished such a show of belligerence², but the situation he had been brought to investigate was far from normal.

Shendrick Mastroval: “Be warned, veteran Adullam. While your service to the Emperor demands respect, I will not tolerate such outbursts in my pursuit of the truth. Do I make myself clear?”

The grizzled³ veteran shifted in his seat turning his look of fury to the sandy stone floor. The bunker had been chosen for its isolation and impregnability⁴, but if it had been a ploy⁵ to scare him, the Commissariat were wasting their time. Adullam did not deal in deceit or lies. He had nothing to fear from Mastroval, because all he would speak was the truth.

Shendrick Mastroval (walking around Adullam): “You might find this hard to believe, but I have experienced the bonds of loyalty forged through combat. I know you to be a man of honor, but from where I am standing, the same cannot be said about your Sergeant”.

(Adullam hemming sarcastically)

Adullam’s gaze swiveled up. Jaw clenched, his knuckles⁶ turned white with the power of his grip on the chair. Mastroval met his eyes with a warning look and folded his arms. He would need all of his patience to get what he wanted from this man.

Shendrick Mastroval: “You have to convince me otherwise, veteran. Take me back to when you believe the conflict with Captain Bandrac began. Make me understand why you feel so sure you are right about Sergeant Zachariah and I am wrong”.

For the first time since entering the blockhouse⁷ Adullam’s mask of fury slipped away. He was being given the chance to defend his comrade. For once he knew he had to stop his mouth racing ahead of his thoughts. It was an opportunity he would take with care and caution.

Adullam: “Commissar, that will be my pleasure”.

* * *

On the Imperial transport the Majestic Light Adullam sat opposite veteran Sergeant Zachariah, his longtime friend and fellow survivor of the Elysian mission to Ophel Minoris. Having both sustained significant injuries their recovery had been a slow and painful one.

Zachariah: “How’s the leg?”

Adullam: “Fine”.

Zachariah: “What are going to do about those missing teeth? You look like an ork”.

Adullam grinned broadly, deliberately showing off the gap.

Adullam: “I think it makes me look tougher. Besides...”

Voice (interrupting): “Attention on deck”.

All troopers stood bolt upright⁸, as Lieutenant Vondrall of the 267th marched into their cramped⁹ quarters flanked by two Munitorum adepts in long robes. Under his

arm he held a data slate. Adullam's eyes met Zachariah's. Both troopers were fit and ready to rejoin the fight against those who would threaten the Imperium.

Vondrall: "Now hear this! General orders for all Elysian detachments regardless of regiment or rank. We are recalled to Elysia".

(soldiers starting to chatter inspired by the news)

Vondrall: "Quiet down, all of you. This comes straight from command. I can confirm that the rumors are true. The pirate dynasty of Lycemicus has been infiltrated. If those scum weren't bad enough, they've now got a greater evil on their side".

Vondrall looked around the quarters. He could see the tension on everyone's faces. Most if not all had fought against the house of Lycemicus and similar pirate families sometime in their careers. And now these most hated of foes who had raided and plundered and murdered Elysians for countless centuries were apparently allied with something far worse.

Vondrall: "They are on our doorstep, lads. It's the Arch Enemy. What are we going to do about it?"

Soldiers (altogether): "Murder!!!"

Vondrall: "Emperor, preserve us. We are making the best speed to Elysia and will be there within two weeks sidereal¹⁰. Full combat drills¹¹ will commence from 06:00 tomorrow. That's all".

Voice: "Salute!"

Zachariah sat heavily on his bank, his face pale. Adullam knew better than to ask why. This news would be enough to sour the mood of his friend and comrade.

Adullam: "So, Elysia... Home..."

Zachariah clenched his jaw and stared blankly, ignoring the flurry¹² of activity around him.

Zachariah: "Yes... Home..."

* * *

Commissar Mastroval eyed Adullam carefully. Gone was the ferocity and anger he had previously shown, replaced by contemplation¹³. Mastroval found the change in his nature interesting.

Shendrick Mastroval: "So it will be fair to say that Sergeant Zachariah was not in the best of humors as even before he met his new commanding officer".

Adullam glanced up at Mastroval and gave him a rueful¹⁴ grin, the scars on his face contorting¹⁵ as he did so. There was no mirth¹⁶ in his eyes.

Adullam: "You could say that, aye".

Shendrick Mastroval: "And you do not know why Zachariah had no wish to return home and defend his home planet?"

The veteran threw Mastroval a dangerous look.

Adullam: "The Sarge's feelings have nothing to do with protecting Elysia or avoiding combat, I can tell you that much. But no, I did not know the reason".

Mastroval folded his arms and looked down at Adullam with a smile.

Shendrick Mastroval: "I do".

Adullam stared at the Commissar. This man had the advantage here or at least claimed to know more than him. He would have to be careful.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Continue".

* * *

Adullam could feel a great unease in the room, but none more so than that from his friend. The regimental HQ had many briefing rooms, but none so large as the one in which he sat alongside Zachariah and dozens of other squad leaders. In front of them groups of higher-ranked officers sat impatiently as a handful of Ministorum priests droned¹⁷ half-heard prayers and wafted¹⁸ incense¹⁹ in blessing over the front rows. Zachariah stared at the huge hololithic projection of Elysia's neighboring planets above the brightly lit lectern before them. The image flickered and juddered²⁰, the shattered moons of Valent Sinestro highlighted as the target. The map was familiar to everyone in the room as a place of ancient bitter conflict.

A figure strode on to the stage to take the podium. Within the next few minutes both men would understand and share the unease of their superiors.

Bandrac: "Be seated".

(officers and soldiers taking their places)

The young men regarded the assembly for a few moments, head held high. A scrivener²¹ servitor at the side of the stage transcribed his words as he spoke.

Bandrac: "I am Captain Lohm of the house Bandrac. Even if you do not know me, you certainly have heard of my family. Following close analysis of the tactical situation Elysian command has concluded the only way to counter the threat from the enemy forces is to launch an all-out attack on Valent Sinestro".

Voices (in the crowd disapprovingly): "What?"

Captain Bandrac held up his hands for silence, his fingers twitched as his temper rose.

Bandrac: “Comrades, the agents of ruin have infiltrated house Lychemicus. There has been a tenfold increase in shipping attacks. Atrocities are being committed on the outline colonies on a scale never seen before. It is only a matter of time before Elysia itself is targeted. A preemptive attack is the only solution. We must strike and strike hard”.

Zachariah turned to Adullam as the assembly took in Bandrac’s words.

Zachariah (whispering): “This is suicide. You know it is impossible to mount a successful drop on Valent. You can’t storm all those planetoids at the same time. The pirates had the terrain and transit routes mapped. We don’t. They can transfer forces at will. Do you remember the last time we tried?”

Adullam ran a finger along the scar that ran from his left temple²² to below his jaw. He remembered well enough. The senior officers were arguing strategy at the front of the briefing wall, with Bandrac glowering²³ down at them with growing impatience.

Zachariah (whispering): “Look at them. I reckon Bandrac has come with this plan and used his family connections to push it. You know what politics are on Elysia. Probably looking to get an early promotion or something”.

Zachariah stared at the Captain. While they were mercifully rare, he knew that type. Some wet behind years brilliant theoreticians who hadn’t yet tasted combat.

Zachariah (whispering): “This plan is doomed and so will be the men sent to undertake it. Fighting on paper never matches what happens in reality”.

Bandrac: “Regiment specific orders will be posted following the conclusion of this briefing. And one final thing effective immediately. I am taking command of the Elysian 158th. That is all”.

Zachariah didn’t reply. The expression on his face said it all.

Zachariah: “He is going to be our new commander”.

* * *

Shendrick Mastroval: “So you admit Zachariah’s disdain²⁴ for Captain Bandrac? His hostility towards him?”

Adullam folded his arms and looked straight ahead as Mastroval loomed²⁵ over him. He would admit absolutely nothing other than the truth.

Adullam: “Every recalled veteran in that room felt the same. The Sergeant’s misgivings were with the target, not so much with the man who presented it”.

Shendrick Mastroval: “Not so much?”

Resuming his pacing Mastroval left the words hanging in the air, but Adullam did not react. He would not be caught out that easily.

(Mastroval walking around the interrogation chamber)

Adullam: "Perhaps you should call in the Captains and Lieutenants who were present at the briefing. It looked to us as if they had far more of a bone to pick²⁶ with Bandrac than we did. At that time anyway".

Mastroval did not break his step. Adullam was right about two things. Young ambitious Captain Bandrac had made many enemies since leaving Elysia with his officer's commission. He was also the sole architect of the attack on Valent Sinestro.

Shendrick Mastroval: "All of this is consigned²⁷ to history, veteran. I am far more interested in the events that never made it into any log or record. I understand Zachariah wasted no time in making his feelings about the mission known".

Adullam stared at the Commissar's back. He knew what Mastroval was asking to hear and he had no choice but to say it. If he didn't, well... There had been plenty of other witnesses.

Adullam: "If you are referring to the final briefing on the Majestic Light, I was standing right next to the Sarge, when Bandrac came strutting²⁸ into the hangar".

* * *

Voice: "Attention on deck!"

(soldiers standing bolt upright)

Bandrac: "As you were. You may be wondering why I have chosen your regiment for this historic mission".

Adullam glanced over to Zachariah. If they were supposed to look honored at the Captain's decision, he did not show it.

Bandrac: "I know you to be one of the finest contingents there is. True, your numbers have been severely depleted due to some poor tactical decisions in the past, but let me assure you. No such mistakes will be made under my command".

Attended by armory adepts some of the troopers present already wore their respirators and helmets. Others had partial armor over their sand-colored fatigues. All had read the final orders. The last thing they needed was a speech. Zachariah shuffled²⁹ uncomfortably, deliberately³⁰ drawing the attention of Bandrac.

Bandrac: "Do you have something to say, Sergeant?"

Zachariah: "Zachariah, sir. No, sir".

Bandrac: “And that is precisely the way it should be. I shall be supporting the first wave onto the main massif³¹. It is the greatest concentration of planetoids³² and has the most predictable gravity wells”.

Zachariah (whispering): “Is that so?”

The Captain darted³³ a glance at Zachariah who stared at the rusting deck plates. Straightening his tunic Bandrac continued.

Bandrac: “I have one addition to your orders. No trooper is to engage their grav-chutes above one hundred meters”.

Voices (in disagreement): “What?!”

Adullam: “Begging your pardon, sir, but one hundred meters...”

Bandrac looked Adullam up and down. Out of the corner of his eye the veteran could see Zachariah’s fists clenching. This was going from bad to worse.

Bandrac: “You heard correctly, trooper. I was under the impression, the 158th could handle high altitude drops better than any other. Perhaps, I was misinformed”.

Zachariah: “Captain Bandrac, sir. A one hundred meter halo engagement is hard enough under normal conditions, but you know our numbers have been brought up to strength with white shield recruits. Sir, most of them won’t be able to control the descent in the fluctuated gravity. Might I recommend...”

Bandrac (going insane and approaching Zachariah): “You will recommend nothing”.

The hangar deck fell silent. All eyes were on Bandrac, his face dark, hand on the grip of his side-arm. Adullam knew what everyone was thinking. Drill Sergeants shouted, Captains did not.

Bandrac (calmly): “We shall have the element of surprise over whoever or whatever is waiting for us. The other Captains will play safe, but they will leave their men hanging in the air as easy targets. I have calculated this down to the centimeter. The glory of first planet fall on the massif shall be ours”.

Adullam’s heart sank. This young Captain had something to prove to the more experienced officers who had been so dismissive³⁴ of him at the briefing. Bandrac saw the lives of his men as little more than pawns in his own ambition. With his first real command he would spearhead³⁵ the attack on Elysia’s ancient enemy. An attack that was doomed to failure.

Bandrac (calmly): “Before I conduct my final equipment check there is the small matter of who will be the first squad to drop”.

Bandrac drew his shoulders back and looked down his nose at Zachariah, who had not moved a muscle since the Captain’s outburst.

Bandrac: "As a reward for your insubordination you shall have the honor, Sergeant. Assemble your men".

(Bandrac leaving the hangar)

Adullam: "Sarge, you need to be careful what you say. You are going to get yourself into real trouble".

Zachariah: "Adullam, we are all in trouble".

* * *

Shendrick Mastroval: "I find it hard to believe troops loyal to the Emperor would act in such a manner towards their commanding officer. I would have executed you all on the spot".

The Commissar was a menacing silhouette in the harsh lights of the blockhouse. But despite knowing that he should proceed with caution Adullam would not let himself falter³⁶.

Adullam: "I don't know how things are done at the Commissariat, sir, but we don't expect our Captains to behave like that. If they can't take a bit of flak³⁷ from their grads what use they will be to you on the battlefield or over it? He was a liability³⁸".

Mastroval folded his hands behind his back keeping his face in shadows.

Shendrick Mastroval (clicking one's tongue): "So? Zachariah is not the only one who judges a man before they have seen him fight? Oh... I expected more of the proud Elysians. You disappoint me".

Adullam opened his mouth to reply, but swallowed his words. For long seconds Mastroval stared at him. There was a truth to the veteran's indignation³⁹ that he could not ignore. Adullam clearly felt as if neither he nor his friend should be answering for anything. Intriguing if not misguided.

Adullam: "What's disappointing, Commissar Mastroval, is that you don't appreciate the significance of what I've just told you".

Shendrick Mastroval: "Then what that might be, veteran?"

Adullam sat back in his chair shielding his eyes against the light. His voice was as hard as the blockhouse walls.

Adullam: "Bandrac later admitted his guilt".

Mastroval took a step closer.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Guilt?"

Adullam: "Aye, for the murder of his own men".

* * *

The Drop Troopers hurtled⁴⁰ towards the fractured drifting chunks of rock and ice of Valent Sinestro. Above and behind Valkyrie carriers waited to disgorge⁴¹ the second wave in support to the first.

Zachariah (breathing hard, over vox): “Malda, Subidan, slow your rate of descent. You are far too low”.

Zachariah watched the numbers spin down on his altimeter. Surrounded by white shields he had no intention of following Bandrac’s suicidal order.

Drop Troopers (moaning while being shot at): “Aaaaahhhh... They... Shooting...”

Zachariah (over vox): “Steady lads, we knew they take a few shots at us”.

On through the hail of fire fell the four squads, one thousand meters. That was far enough.

Zachariah (over vox): “Zachariah to all troopers! Engage! Engage! Engage! Emperor’s name...”

(one of the Drop Troopers screaming in the vox)

Adullam: “Sergeant, failed deployment”.

Looking to his left Zachariah saw Adullam trying to activate his own grav-chute. Despite the turbulence and the fire all around he repeated the sequence calmly and methodically, but after a few seconds gestured with his finger across his throat. Zachariah nodded grimly. The grav-chutes couldn’t all fail at once. They had been tampered⁴² with.

Zachariah (over vox): “Zachariah to all troopers, remain calm! Disengage the control feed and pull out the blue wire. This will activate your emergency thruster system”

The Sergeant twisted in midair, yanking⁴³ away the armored flexicable to expose the control bead. Mid-drop repair was something only the most experienced troopers would normally attempt. It was disgusting training with holo recording showing of how it can be done, but it was deemed too dangerous for new recruits. For them beyond their hasty whispered prayers and the machine spirit blessings of the Adeptus Mechanicus, every jump was quite literally a leap of faith.

Subidan: “Ahhhhh.... Sarge... I can’t... I can’t get to the wire. I am nearing a hundred meters. What shall I... Aaaaahhhh”.

Subidan and Malda’s thrusters burst into life. The chutes had been programmed to activate at one hundred meters and the manual override deactivated.

Adullam: “Malda’s gone!”

Zachariah (over vox): “Subidan, you are going to hit a null gravity channel. Prepare yourself as sheer force...”

Subidan (interrupting): "I'm... Aaaaaah... I'm losing directional control. Sarge, my speed is increasing... I am spinning... I can't..."

(Subidan collapsing lifelessly to the ground)

(another white shield screaming in the vox)

Zachariah watched helplessly as other white shields followed just as he had warned Bandrac.

Zachariah (over vox): "Damn it! Thrusters engaged. Adullam?"

Adullam: "Right with you, Sarge".

Zachariah (over vox): "Concentrate fire directly below. We need to clear the landing zone or we'll lose the second wave too".

Adullam: "Left flank, Sergeant, two squads coming in. We've only got a hundred meters to go, Sergeant. We need more room".

Zachariah (over vox): "Give them one of your charges".

Adullam: "My thinking exactly (throwing a detonation charge) Death from above you filthy hotan".

Voice (in the distance): "Look out!"

(explosion going off)

Drop Troopers: "Prepare! Attack!"

The blast cleared a radius large enough for Zachariah and the surviving Drop Troops to land, but within seconds enemy reinforcements appeared from the jagged rocks surrounding the outer edge of the massif to take the place at the fore.

(one of the enemies charging with a shriek)

Adullam: "Do you hear that, Sergeant?"

Zachariah: "I hear it all right. We need to get away from here. All remaining troopers, move on target Beta-6. I repeat, target Beta-6. Where the hell is Bandrac with those other Valkyries? That idiot is to see what..."

(Zachariah interrupted by the enemy's charge)

Zachariah: "Adullam, look out".

(Zachariah killing enemy charging Adullam)

Adullam: "Much obliged, Sarge".

Zachariah: "We need to get to cover. Move!"

(troopers running to Beta-6)

Despite overwhelming enemy numbers Zachariah led Adullam and the remaining troopers towards target Beta-6. A handful of squat single-store buildings in the near distance. Luckily the reports of them being heavily defended were like so many things on the mission: a mistake.

Zachariah: "Adullam, charges. The rest of you, covering fire! Everyone inside!"

(Drop Troopers running to the building as the charges go off)

The true extent of just how wrong their intelligence had been came clear. The buildings were little more than a decoy⁴⁴ intended to force as many casualties as possible.

Zachariah: "Out of your drop gear. Get the doorways and windows covered. Vox?"

Vox Officer: "Sergeant?"

Zachariah: "Raise Captain Bandrac, give him our situation report. There is nothing of any value here. We are an easy target".

Vox Officer: "On it, sir".

Zachariah (offering Adullam a drink): "Adullam?"

Adullam (taking a sip): "Thank you".

Zachariah: "I do not see an easy way out of this. Sounds to me like our air support is busy up there. The other attack groups have hit similar null gravity pockets to reach these useless objectives. They have been in the same situation as us".

Adullam: "Quite the same, Sarge".

Zachariah nodded sullenly⁴⁵ as he looked down to his grave-chute harness⁴⁶ lying discarded on the floor, its twin exhausts still warm from the descent.

Zachariah: "I can't believe Bandrac went this far, but there is no other explanation".

Adullam: "Why else would a Captain insist on carrying out an equipment check? That's for the armorers and squad leaders. Did anyone go with him? We were all in the hangar".

Zachariah: "He must have used a servitor to reset the engagement altitude on all those grav-chutes and override the manual so quickly (taking a deep breath). But why? Why would he do that?"

Adullam: "Who knows with these blue bloods⁴⁷..."

Zachariah: "To score points against the other Captain? To satisfy some ancient vendetta or feud?"

Adullam: "Emperor, preserve us from the great houses of Elysia".

From the shattered window Zachariah scanned the distant ridge of the massif through his sniper scope. Beyond the jagged horizon other huge triangular chunks of rock hung in perfect suspension between space and the unseen churning gas giant below.

Adullam: "Anything moving out there?"

Zachariah: "Not yet. That's only a matter of time. Had been using the gravity corridors to get here from the other planetoids. That ridge will hide them until they are almost upon us".

Adullam: "So a world of traps and ambushes, Sarge... We both knew that".

(Zachariah putting a new clip in his sniper rifle)

Zachariah: "Shame, Bandrac wouldn't listen to us, eh? Well I be damned if this place is going to claim any more Elysian lives. Vox, report!"

Vox Officer: "A lot of confusion, Sarge. The support ships are taking heavy losses, but there have been some important gains. A lot of infrastructure destroyed here and on the other land masses".

Adullam (smiling): "Hope it was of more use than this place. I wouldn't..."

The young communications specialist held up his hand for silence and pressed the headset to his ear. As he listened his expression changed from confusion to relief.

Vox Officer: "Sarge, all second wave drops have been cancelled. It's a general retreat, sir".

Adullam looked at Zachariah. The victories had been clearly heavily outweighed by the defeats. That was no surprise to anyone in the bunker.

Zachariah: "We need to get to the recovery point. All troopers, gather your equipment. We are getting out of here".

Vox Officer: "Sir, report coming in. The Captain's drop ship has crashed on Uldurax".

All eyes turned to Zachariah. Uldurax was the larger of the planetoids visible from their position on the massif. Snapping up his sniper rifle he activated the scope once again and zoomed in on the huge tooth-shaped landmass floating mere kilometers away.

Zachariah: "I don't see... Oh, wait... Smoke, very close to the perimeter. Could be a ship".

As Zachariah scanned left and right across the obscured surface of Uldurax a bright red flare sailed into the purple blue sky, then shot away at an angle as it fell foul of the conflicting gravities.

Zachariah: "Distress signal confirmed".

Adullam: "We can't help him, Sarge. He's as good as dead".

Zachariah: "Anyone else on hand?"

Vox Officer: "No, sir. We've barely got carriers enough for the retrievals. They are redirecting the second wave drop ships to rescue, but it'll take time to unload their squads on the Majestic Light first".

The young man slowly lowered the headset in his hand. His face was grim.

Vox Officer: "Valkyrie inbound to our recovery position. However... (grimly): "They don't have enough room to get us all out in one trip".

Zachariah (smiling sarcastically): "Adullam, enemy movement at the base of the ridge. They are heading our way. Vox, how many of us will be left behind?"

Vox Officer: "Five, sir".

Zachariah: "This just keeps getting better".

* * *

Commissar Mastroval glared down at Adullam.

Shendrick Mastroval: "So it was you who proposed leaving Captain Bandrac to the enemy and not Zachariah? Did it not occur to any of you that his tactical knowledge will be of considerable value to the enemy? This is cowardice, soldier. A dereliction⁴⁸ of your duty to the Imperium".

Adullam's jaw tightened. Gripping the arms of the chair he began to rise. Mastroval's hand moved easily to the pommel⁴⁹ of his chainsword, the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

Adullam (taking a deep breath): "Setting aside the fact that the situation was of his own making and that he had been responsible for the deaths of over half of our attack force I felt he'd get what he deserved".

Mastroval's hand left his sword. Adullam met his gaze.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Your accusations against Bandrac are a serious offence. What proof did you have then or now the Captain tampered with any equipment? Why was there no official voicing of this suspicion? None of this adds up at all".

Adullam: "If you let me continue, sir, you will find out".

Shendrick Mastroval: "Very well".

Adullam: "Zachariah asked for three volunteers to accompany him in rescuing Bandrac. Every man stepped forward. Along with Ollev, Tabrini, Steldor we readied our gear as the Sergeant carried out a partial recharge on our grav-chutes. Once that was done he took the limiters off the thruster controls and..."

Shendrick Mastroval (interrupting): "So Zachariah has a working knowledge of grav-chute mechanics? How interesting..."

Adullam stared at the Commissar. It was a weak challenge.

Adullam: "His plan was simple. We five would create a diversion to cover the rest of the group's extraction, then make our way over to Uldurax".

Shendrick Mastroval: "I've heard a fair amount about this half-hearted⁵⁰ rescue mission. But I'm keen to hear more from someone who was actually there".

Mastroval continued to pace.

Shendrick Mastroval: "So what do you say brought about this change of tack⁵¹ for Sergeant Zachariah?"

Adullam looked up sharply. It was his turn to have the whisper of a smile play across his scarred lips.

Adullam: "Did I say he changed his mind? As I said he had a plan to get there and hoped by then there would be another ship to get us off Uldurax, whether Bandrac had survived or not"

Mastroval saw a flicker, confusion, doubt perhaps, flash across Adullam's face. Something had clearly bothered the veteran at the recollection of Zachariah's plan. Mastroval knew what it was. He seized the moment.

Shendrick Mastroval: "This plan... How did you think you were going to reach the planetoid floating kilometers distant? How did your Sergeant think that you would have any chance in rescuing the Captain?"

Rising to his feet Adullam relaxed his body as much as he could. He did not wish to present a threat to Mastroval. He wanted to talk with him at the same level.

Adullam: "Commissar, I trust this man with my life. It was not my place to question him particularly in the situation we found ourselves. Yes, I had no idea how he planned to do it. And yes I would have happily left Bandrac to rot on Uldurax for what he'd done to us, but Zachariah isn't like that".

Mastroval looked into Adullam's eyes, looking for any hint of deceit in the veteran's words or expression. The truth was being presented to him, at least from the Elysian's perspective as skewed as it was.

Adullam: "For the Sarge this was a matter of honor. Surely that is something you can understand. Zachariah could not allow a fellow servant of the Emperor to die if there was any way he might prevent it. Not even Bandrac. It didn't matter whether we knew how he planned to do it or not".

Mastroval put a finger to his lips, then nodded back to the chair. Adullam sighed.

Adullam (taking back his seat): "As we exited target Beta-6, we could see the first recovery ships heading down towards us. Its port52 engine was on fire and the tail all shot apart. As it turned out that was the good news".

* * *

(damaged Valkyrie approaching the Drop Troopers)

The pirates of house Lycemicus raced towards the already damaged extraction Valkyrie pouring fire upon it in the effort to deal the killing blow.

Zachariah: "Adullam with me. Ollev, Tabrini, Stelldor, concentrate fire on the enemy. That will draw their attention away. We'll hook over to the ridge. As soon as they get too near full back to our position. The rest of you, don't stop running until you get to this ship. We'll see you back home. The Emperor protects".

Drop Troopers (in a choir): "The Emperor protects".

(Drop Troopers running to the Valkyrie and evacuating form the battlefield)

There were a dozen enemy contacts with twice as many of them inbound and those were just the ones that they could see.

Adullam: "We won't be able to take them all, Sarge".

Zachariah did not answer. Studying the angled outcrop53 of the ridge he followed it upwards into the sky like the blade of a broken knife. At its peak from their position Uldurax floated only a few kilometers away filling most of the sky. The smoke from Badrac's hidden crash site was beginning to thin.

Zachariah: "We won't have to. Lay a series of charges at the base of that ridge. It's the only way up and they'll have to follow the same route to get to us. Keep one charge in reserve".

Adullam: "Sarge, there is no other way down. The peak is a dead end. We'll be cutting ourselves off. How's that going to help Bandrac?"

Zachariah glanced over to his friend. Even with his visor down Adullam saw a look in his eyes that he had seen many times before. A calm certainty, born of something he knew that others did not. It was an expression that had saved Adullam's far more than one occasion. The veteran did not ask again.

Zachariah: "Get behind me and provide cover as soon as the charges are set. The others are on their way back now. Ollev, you are falling behind. They are nearly upon you! Move it! Tabrini, watch out for Ollev. He's... "

(Zachariah interrupted by Ollev's dying screams)

Zachariah: "They hit his fuel reserve. Tabrini, Stelldor, get over here now. We'll cover you".

Adullam: "The rest of the extraction ships are away".

Zachariah: "Time to start climbing lads. Get that detonator ready, Adullam".

Zachariah hooked the strap of his rifle around his neck and lunged up the slippery rock face followed by Tabrini and Stelldor. Within moments the four troopers had made it to the base of a broad steep ledge. Pausing they turned and fired down on their attackers who had reached the ridge below.

Zachariah: "Blow the charges!"

(explosions killing numerous attackers)

Adullam: "That should slow them down".

Zachariah: "There's plenty more to take their place and they are heading this way. I'll take point, tread exactly where I do, understood?"

Adullam: "Sarge, you know I've never questioned your orders, but what exactly do you have in mind? Uldurax looks a long way from where I am standing".

Zachariah: "Look over to the outer edge of the ridge. You see those smooth tromps running in straight lines?"

The other three troopers peered over the sheer drop down to the horizon of churning gas that was the furnace heart of Valent Sinestro. Sure enough in the orange yellow glow they saw a network of channels at random angles.

Zachariah: "They'd been made by null gravity fields. Most of them go off into free space but some connect the planetoids together. That's how the pirates have always moved from moon to moon and that's how their reinforcements are getting here".

Adullam: "We are going to jump upwards to Uldurax..."

Zachariah looked to the end of the ridge a couple of hundred meters distant.

Zachariah: "That's exactly what we are going to do".

Adullam: "Sarge, how in the Emperor's name do you know which channel to follow?"

Zachariah looked to Adullam, then the other two in turn. The enemy were climbing towards them firing wildly, screaming for blood.

Zachariah: "I don't... Not exactly... But with our thruster reserves we should be able to divert our way out if we get into trouble. We can do this".

Adullam: "Don't see we have much choice in the matter! Let's go lads!"

Zachariah: "Look for channels that line up with Uldurax or at least within thirty degrees. There won't be many".

The distant planetoid hung in space before them, the gas core now illuminating every detail of its torn and ragged tunnel. Zachariah stepped forwards. Looking down he

stared at the sheer drop to the base of the massif's outer rim. It must have been at least a kilometer down. And then he saw what he had been looking for.

Adullam (breathing hard): "End of the line, Sarge".

Zachariah: "Set your final charge, ten second delay. We need to blow the top of this ridge so it destroys the entrance to the null gravity channel. We'll drop it as we jump. Stelldor! Tabrini! Suppressing fire. We are heading for the deep channel to the right, the one which terminates halfway down the sheer wall. I will lead, then Tabrini, then Stelldor. Clear?"

Adullam prepared the farewell charge and Zachariah tapped the other two veterans on the shoulder.

Zachariah: "In three... two... one... Jump!"

Adullam, Tabrini and Stelldor watched Zachariah speeding across space to Uldurax caught in the unseen gravity well.

Zachariah: "Normal drop rate... Aaaaaahhhh... (moaning indecipherably)".

Adullam (angrily) "Don't just stand there you idiots. Go! And that just leaves me standing here, talking to myself. Ten... Nine... Eight... (explosion going off) Oooohhhh... That will do..."

(Adullam screaming out loud as he takes a jump to Uldurax)

Adullam: "At least we don't have to worry about them coming after... Oooohhhh"

Caught up in the gravity channel Adullam could see Tabrini, Stelldor and in the lead Zachariah streaking towards the huge floating planetoid. The veteran couldn't quite believe it. Of all the paths to follow Zachariah had known this one to be right. Could it just have been a lucky guess? And how had he known about them in the first place?

Zachariah: "All troopers, we are heading straight for Uldurax's leading edge. We need to go up and over. Follow my lead and ready your weapons. May the Emperor guide us".

Zachariah's thrusters fired. Slowly he began to angle upwards until free of the null gravity well he shot nearly vertical into the darkening sky.

Zachariah (talking through teeth shut): "Have... to get... more height..."

Even though Zachariah's field adjustments had given the grav-chutes more thrust they were not jump-packs. At the rate of climb he was achieving, he would soon exhaust the fuel and smash into the outer ridge of the planetoid.

Zachariah (talking through teeth shut): "Come on... Almost... Yes!"

As he cleared the ridge Zachariah immediately spotted the crash site in the shadow of the jagged rocks. In the middle distance a ramshackle56 collection of towers stuck

out of the unforgiving surface of Uldurax like broken teeth and picked out in the sickly yellow lights of the buildings. Zachariah saw many dark silhouettes moving across the planetoid.

Zachariah (breathing hard): "This is Zachariah. I have the crash site in view. Enemy forces are heading towards it at speed. We need to move fast".

Adullam: "We are right with you, Sarge".

* * *

(Zachariah making a hard landing with a moan)

Landing on Uldurax Zachariah and the others moved to the smashed remains of the Valkyrie. Most of the fuselage was intact but the port wing and engine lay burning some meters away beyond the rocks, the other folded beneath another outcrop against which the remains of the aircraft now rested.

(lasershot making Drop Troopers halt)

Zachariah: "What the... Hold your fire! Friendly incoming!"

Bandrac: "Identify yourself!"

Zachariah: "Sergeant Zachariah and squad from the 158th".

From inside the mangled fuselage a figure staggered into the gloom, sword in one hand, laspistol in the other. It was Captain Bandrac.

Bandrac: "You... have brought a ship? Can we get out of here?"

His voice was shaking. Zachariah had been in aircraft crashes before, some as bad as the one before him, some even worse. He felt inclined to cut the younger officer some slack⁵⁷.

Zachariah: "No, sir. We have not. Do you have long range vox capacity? The fleet may have regrouped enough for us to signal a new extraction".

In the fading light Zachariah could see Bandrac's eyes narrow in confusion.

Bandrac: "I... I don't know. The pilot and navigator are dead. Go see to it, Sergeant".

Anger flared in Zachariah's chest. The Captain should have been on the vox as soon as he was able relaying valuable intelligence on the enemy's strength and deployment on Uldurax to Elysian command. It was just such a lack of detailed information that had led them to this catastrophe.

Adullam: "Sarge, they are getting close. We'll set up a perimeter as best we can, but they will be able to surround us easily. We need extraction back to the Majestic Light now".

Zachariah held up a hand in acknowledgment. As the three troopers spread out around the crash site he moved towards the smashed cockpit. Reaching into the navigator's position he took the headset and activated the vox.

Zachariah: "Priority vermillion, Sergeant Zachariah, 158th Elysian. Five strong on Uldurax, location south-east of... target Epsilon-4. Fifty meters from the outer rim. Request immediate extraction. Enemy closing. Over".

The indicator light on the navigator's panel began to fade. Circuits crackled and wisps of smoke rose into the night air.

Zachariah: "Priority vermillion, Sergeant Zachariah, 158th Elysian. Five strong on Uldurax near the outer rim. Request... Ohhhh!"

(vox panel exploding)

Zachariah: "Damn it!"

Bandrac: "Well? Are they on their way?"

Zachariah threw the headset back onto the lifeless body of the navigator.

Zachariah: "Unknown, sir. The system failed before I received any acknowledgement".

(battle commencing in the distance)

Adullam: "Captain! Sergeant! We could need some help here!"

Enemy fire began to strike the upper parts of the Valkyrie from all directions. Hunkering 58down Bandrac turned to Zachariah, his face twisted in frustration.

Bandrac: "What kind of idiot launches a rescue mission with three men and no air support? What use is that to me?"

Zachariah rounded on him. He could hold his tongue no longer.

Zachariah: "And what kind of idiot launches a full scale assault on an enemy whose strength and position is not fully understood? What kind of idiot sabotages the equipment of his own men for some ridiculous game of one-upmanship?"

Bandrac looked to the discarded grav-chutes and saw how the feeder key had been stripped away to override his handing. Raising his laspistol he pointed it directly into Zachariah's face.

Bandrac (infuriated): "How dare you speak to me in such a fashion? I am your commandeering officer".

Zachariah (screaming angrily): "Then start acting like one!"

Adullam: "Incoming!"

Zachariah: "Get down!"

(explosion going off near the Drop Troopers)

Bandrac: "You will pay for this, Sergeant".

Zachariah: "If we live long enough, Captain, I swear everyone will learn what you have done this day".

(Drop Trooper moaning in the distance)

Adullam: "We've lost Tabrini. Someone, take his place! Quick, they are everywhere!"

Zachariah: "Full back to the wreckage! Use your grenades!"

(Stelldor screaming from pain)

Zachariah: "Stelldor!"

Adullam: "This is not looking good, Sarge!"

Zachariah (tossing a grenade): "Keep fighting, flak grenades!"

Bandrac: "Form up around me, protect your Captain!"

Zachariah: "Captain, with all due respect, why don't you..."

Adullam: "Incoming Valkyries!"

Bandrac: "It's about time".

(Valkyries shooting down enemy forces)

Zachariah: "It's now or never. Let's get out of here".

(three soldiers running into the maw of the opening ramp)

Bandrac: "Come on!"

* * *

(three soldiers breathing hard in the departing Valkyrie)

The three threw themselves into the recovery ship to be greeted by Lieutenant Dewfalco of the 217th. It took off immediately clearing Uldurax and thundering up towards the awaiting transport Majestic Light in high orbit.

Bandrac (catching his breath): "Lieutenant, report".

Dewfalco: "Considerable losses in the first wave, Captain Bandrac. 40% of objectives were reached, less than 20% achieved".

Adullam: "Twenty percent... Throne..."

Bandrac: "Watch your tongue, trooper. That is well within my projected margins, admittedly at the lower end of the scale. Why was the second wave called off, Lieutenant?"

Zachariah: "Projected margins..."

Lieutenant Dewfalco cast a warning glance over to Zachariah before answering.

Dewfalco: "I am not certain, sir, but it happened just after the 217th discovered a group of senior advisors to the house of Lycemicus on the massif's southern conurbation⁶⁰. They were... degenerates, sir. Offworlders bringing the taint of their dark gods with them. The pirates are changing their strategy. Our losses were..."

Bandrac: "The... The southern conurbation? Don't you mean 'eastern'?"

Dewfalco: "No, sir. They were not where you... I mean not where we were told they would be. Our losses were heavy but we managed to take most of them alive. Quite a victory, sir".

Bandrac glared at the Lieutenant. It was a victory indeed for the 217th. As Dewfalco let his words hang in the air Zachariah saw his chance.

Zachariah: "Lieutenant, permission to..."

Vox Operator (interrupting): "Captain Bandrac, Elysian command on long range vox for you, sir".

As the Valkyrie powered towards the orbiting transport ship Bandrac rose and took a headset from the Lieutenant. Moving to the corner of the hold he turned his back on the three men.

Zachariah: "Lieutenant Dewfalco, I need to report some concerns about our failed drop onto the massif".

Dewfalco: "Concerns, Sergeant? What concerns?"

There was something in the Lieutenant's wary⁶¹ eyes that told Zachariah he knew what was coming. It was obvious that the 217th also suffered greatly during Bandrac's mission.

Zachariah: "I have reason to believe that our grav-chutes were..."

Bandrac: "One more word, Sergeant, and I will have you and your lackey thrown out into the void".

Adullam scarred lips twisted in a snarl.

Adullam: "Lackey, sir?"

He reached for his lasgun, but Zachariah put a hand on his friend's arm.

Zachariah: "Steady yourself, trooper".

Dewfalco turned his gaze from Adullam to Zachariah, to Captain Bandrac, his hand resting lightly on the butt⁶² of the holstered laspistol.

Bandrac: "Lieutenant, this man is a disgrace to the uniform. He is belligerent. He is ill-mannered and he does not know his place. What is more, he is a liar".

The Captain's face flushed with growing anger.

Bandrac: "You are about to make a career decision, Lieutenant. I suggest you think very carefully about your next actions".

He nodded pointedly at Dewfalco's sidearm. Indecision flickered over the Lieutenant's features. Adullam did not let go off the lasgun at his feet. Zachariah readied himself. Things seemed like they were about to get very ugly very quickly.

Dewfalco: "Captain Bandrac, your Sergeant wishes to raise a concern about an operational issue. Section nine of the Departamento Munitorum ..."

Bandrac (interrupting in fury): "Do not quote Astra Militarum regulations to me, Lieutenant".

Bandrac shook with fury. He was losing control of the situation.

Bandrac: "There was indeed an operational issue. Sergeant Zachariah ordered the deliberate tampering of grav-chutes mid-drop resulting in a significant loss of life".

Adullam (charging the Captain): "You shut..."

Zachariah (stopping Adullam): "Adullam, put your weapon down".

Dewfalco: "Trooper, I suggest you do what your Sergeant tells you. Lower your weapon or I shall drop you where you stand".

Bandrac: "What are you waiting for? Shoot him!"

Dewfalco's aim was as steady as his gaze. Slowly Adullam lowered his lasgun and sat cross-legged on the deck, muttering darkly under his breath.

Bandrac: "Did you not hear me, Lieutenant? I said kill him. In fact you can kill them both".

Dewfalco: "Sergeant Zachariah, did you do what the Captain alleges? Did you order your squad to tamper with their grav-chutes mid-drop?"

Out of the corner of his eye Zachariah saw Bandrac sneer of satisfaction. In that moment he realized just how much trouble he was in. There was no point in compounding⁶³ it with a lie.

Zachariah: "I had to, sir. The chutes had been programmed for a hundred meter auto-engagement. It was that that killed the troopers, not my field repairs".

Dewfalco's jaw tightened. He cast an eye over the man's equipment.

Dewfalco: "Do we have any of the grav-chutes? They would reveal the truth".

Bandrac dismissed Dewfalco's question with a wave.

Bandrac: "Lieutenant, it should be enough for you that I saw the chutes and can confirm what happened. Now do as I say and execute these men!"

Dewfalco looked to Zachariah and Adullam. It was obvious from his expression where his loyalties lay, but both men respected the impossible position he was in. The Lieutenant shook his head, then calmly engaged his pistol's safety. He removed the power cell before offering the weapon to Bandrac by its opened casing.

Dewfalco: "I will not kill these men, Captain. I cannot ascertain⁶⁴ the truth of their claims at this time. I will be happy to have them put in iron as the moment we arrive and sent to the brig⁶⁵. But there will be no executions today. This is a matter for the Commissariat".

* * *

Adullam stared at the Commissar. There was nothing else to tell. Mastroval pursed⁶⁶ his lips.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Astonishing. Sounds to me that you both deserved to be shot. As did Dewfalco for not immediately carrying out the Captain's orders".

Adullam: "After the information they got out of the cult advisors he grabbed on the massif even Bandrac wouldn't have gotten away with that. As far as the regiment was concerned, the man was a hero and all his men too".

Shendrick Mastroval: "Indeed. How was your time in jail?"

Adullam threw the Commissar a sneer⁶⁷.

Adullam: "Wasn't the first time I've been behind bars, sir. Likely won't be the last".

For the first time in Adullam's questioning Mastroval pulled up a chair.

Shendrick Mastroval: "While you were languishing⁶⁸ in the brig of the Majestic Light Bandrac was being congratulated for the boldness⁶⁹ of his attack and for securing unique intelligence on the house of Lycemicus. And that must have sat heavily with you, with Zachariah".

Adullam folded his arms.

Adullam: "Commissar, it sat heavily with every Elysian who survived the mission, pitifully few that we were. Besides Lycemicus knew their offworlders allies had been taken. They knew what they would tell us and they didn't seem to care. That was pretty obvious from the rest of the campaign, wasn't it?"

Mastroval tried to hide it, but Adullam caught the flicker of agreement in his eyes. If Bandrac's first engagement had generated a high body count, the losses on the second were regarded as nothing short of staggering⁷⁰. For the briefest moment the two men understood one another.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Hm... It still does not explain, why there is no record of a hearing, of Dewfalco or yourselves giving evidence about your allegations towards Captain Bandrac. How do you explain that?"

Adullam: "You are the Commissar, you tell me".

Despite himself Mastroval smiled.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Or perhaps Bandrac realized having you killed without any formal charge will lead to more questions than he was prepared to answer. Perhaps Lieutenant Dewfalco managed to persuade Bandrac to be lenient⁷¹. That is not my concern. The fate of Captain Bandrac is all I am interested in".

Adullam scowled⁷². Mastroval clearly knew far more about their stay⁷³ of execution than he was letting on.

Shendrick Mastroval: "But veterans like you being demoted to instructors at the D-64 training ground... Hm... That seems far preferable to summary⁷⁴ execution, wouldn't you say? Lenient even? Far more than you deserve?"

Adullam: "You might think that, but for the Sarge... Every day he spent down here was a living reminder of those recruits who died during the mission. How would you feel if you were tasked with training replacements for men, good Elysians, that should never have died in the first place? How would you feel if the incompetence of a person responsible for their death was going to remain unpunished?"

His jaw set firm, Mastroval leaned forwards.

Shendrick Mastroval: "Oh... I'd be angry, full of resentment⁷⁵, vengeful".

Adullam: "Yes, any normal man, any loyal servant of the Emperor would. And you know what? I am glad Bandrac ended up getting killed".

Shendrick Mastroval: "Not killed, veteran. Murdered".