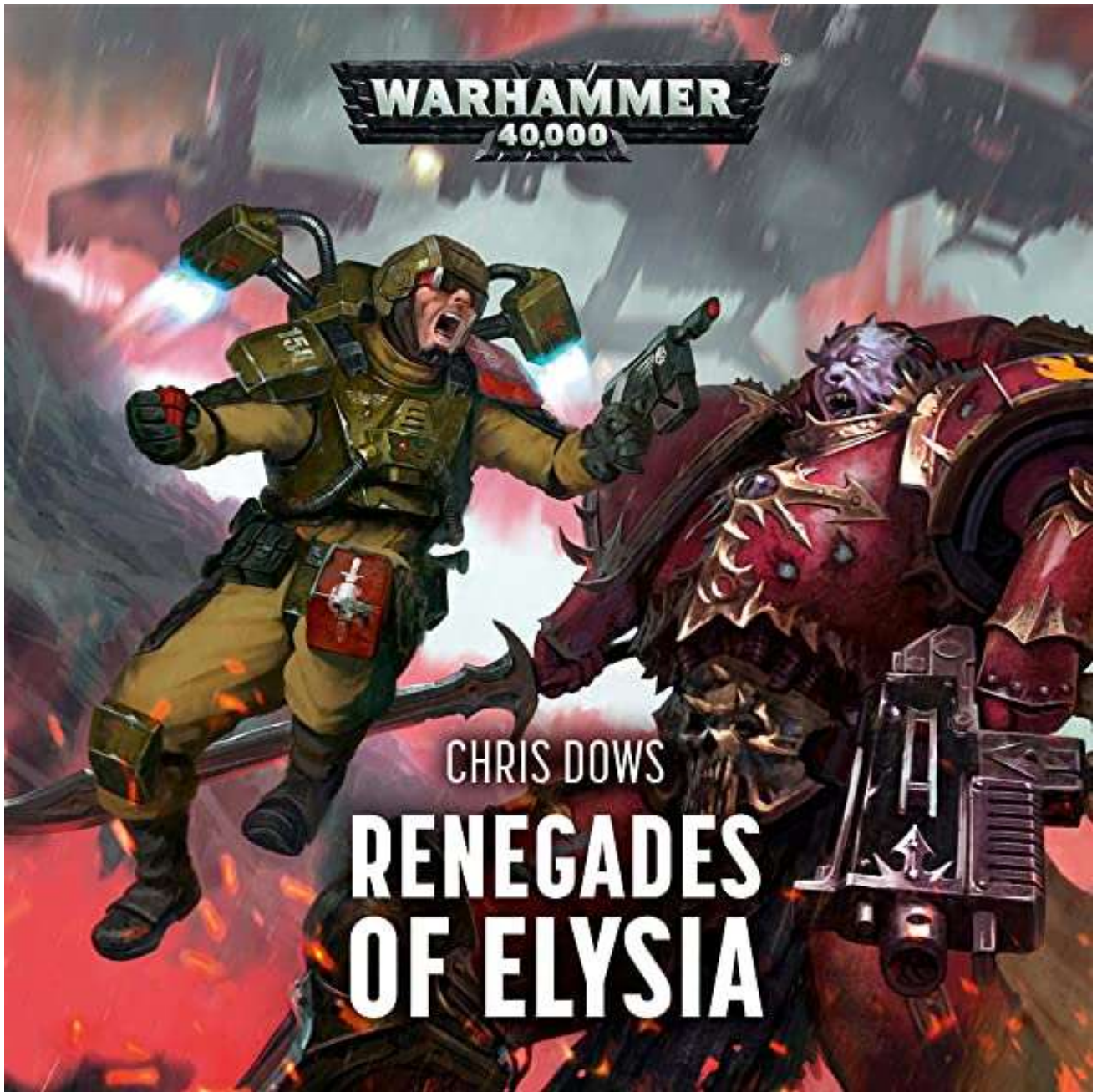


WARHAMMER
40,000



CHRIS DOWS

**RENEGADES
OF ELYSIA**

RENEGADES OF ELYSIA (2017)

Written by Chris Dows

Performed by John Banks, Matthew Hunt, Stephen Perring, Cliff Chapman, Jonathan Keeble, Steve Conlin

Scripted by Reverend

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

- * Pillya Uldek – Trooper;
- * Zachariah – Sergeant of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Adullam – Veteran of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Shendrick Mastroval – Commissar;
- * Lohm Badrak – Captain of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Venlin, Solbax, Tobin, Rolan, Paradel, Mirdolon - 158th Elysian Drop Troopers;
- * Krella - pilot.
- * Dewfalco - Lieutenant of the 217th Elysian drop troop unit.

Uldek: “No, what you are accusing him of cannot be true. Not Sergeant Zachariah. He trained me, made me the Elysian I am today. If it hadn’t been for him I’d be dead. I can’t believe it”.

Mastroval: “Let’s get one thing very clear here, trooper. Just because your planet has suffered the greatest loss in Elysian history, don’t think I will hesitate to add your worthless life to that number if you question my word”.

Commissar Shendrick Mastroval’s eyes bore¹ deep into Uldek. His mission to investigate the allegations of murder against veteran Sergeant Zachariah and even deeper suspicions about his wider motives were proving to be more complicated than expected. Of course, Mastroval knew the Elysians would draw together in a veil of indignant² silence over the mysterious death of Captain Lohm Bandrac. He had clearly been a figure of great controversy during his short command. But now before him was an Elysian drop trooper barely out of the very same training ground on which Mastroval was conducting his interrogation, daring to speak in such a manner to a representative of the Emperor’s Commissariat. This would not do.

Uldek: “You have my apologies, Commissar. It’s just that I find your accusations against Sergeant Zachariah hard to believe”.

Mastroval (walking around): “And I find your loyalty to a man you have known barely three months equally so. Trooper Pillya Uldek, yours is a well-established Elysian family, prone³ to acts of cowardice over the centuries”.

(Mastroval checking through his data-slate)

Mastroval: “Nineteen years and six months... Old for a recruit... I see you were maintaining House Uldek’s tradition of avoiding the tithe⁴ as long as possible”

Uldek: “We are one of the oldest noble houses. Our history...”

Mastroval (interrupting): “Does not interest me in the least. Calm yourself, trooper”.

Uldek could see the Commissar’s resting on the holster of his sidearm.

Uldek: “The reason I entered training so late has nothing to do with avoiding my obligations, Commissar”.

(Mastroval tutting)

Uldek: “I was serving at the Parliate⁵ in preparation of becoming a representative of House Uldek, a great honor that exempted⁶ me from the tithe. However given the threat of House Lycemicus alliance with the Arch Enemy I decided to fight for my people instead. I felt it to be my duty”.

Everything Uldek said was true according to the files Mastroval had studied prior to the interrogation. Dozens of Elysian houses made up the noble assembly, all fighting each other for influence within their great senate – the Parliate . It was well-known Elysian politicians employed the same guile⁷ and ferocity as their renowned drop troops to promote the agendas of their dynasties. Uldek would have learned much about the art of leadership and persuasion even in the few months he had served within the Parliate. There was little wonder Zachariah and Adullam had spotted his talent so quickly. For this reason alone it occurred to Mastroval that despite his youth and military inexperience Uldek’s display of fear in the presence of the Commissariat was perhaps greater than he might expect.

Mastroval (smiling sarcastically): “Your duty? Really? Recount your first meeting with Zachariah, but be warned. I will not tolerate subterfuge⁸”.

* * *

Elysian Drop troop training ground D-64 was a massive sprawling⁹ compound on the edge of Elysia’s great eastern desert. Under normal circumstances it would process a single cohort of 5,000 recruits over a three month training cycle, but close to twice that number had been crammed¹⁰ into its towering walls to replace those lost on Veyland Sinestre . As thousands of Elysians jostled¹¹ against each other, Uldek forced

himself to the front eager to make a good impression on the row of solemn12-looking veterans lining the parade ground.

Training Officer: "You, recruit 5-95, over here! Front and center!

Uldek (running towards the officer): "I am 95, sire! Yes, sir!"

(Uldek bumping into another trooper)

Trooper: "Watch who you are pushing, lowly dog".

Uldek: "What? Lowly dog? Is that the best you can do?"

Trooper: "Actually, no".

(Trooper hitting Uldek several times, both exchanging blows)

(Trooper knocking Uldek down and continuing to hit him)

Training Officer: "That's enough!"

(Officer approaching the struggling troopers)

Training Officer: "So we have our first volunteers for the train duty. Congratulations, gentlemen! You are now officially transferred to Special Weapons. Let's see how much fight you got left by the time we are finished with you".

(microphone turning on)

On the podium behind the line of nail-hard veterans a single figure strode up the stairs and took his place overlooking the assembled recruits. Folding his hands behind his back the officer stared down imperiously13.

Zachariah: "Emperor's Throne, does Bandrac ever tire of the sound of his own voice?"

Adullam: "Doesn't look like it". At least if he is here, he is not dreaming of another way of getting us all killed".

Bandrac (over the microphone): "Recruits! Welcome to camp D-64. I am Captain Lohm of the House Bandrac. You will surely..."

(Bandrac's voice fading away)

* * *

Mastroval: "Didn't that strike you as seditious14? Given your experience at the Parliate you of all recruits understood the value of keeping one's opinions to yourself".

What Uldek had not disclosed were the looks on all the veterans' faces who had stood with their backs to Captain Bandrac as he had welcomed the trainees to D-64. From Sergeant to Lieutenant they all had murder in their eyes.

Uldek: "Everyone on that parade ground knew what had happened on Veyland Sinestre, Commissar. What we didn't know was who to blame, not then. I'd my feel of politics and inn-fighting in the Parliate. I didn't even know who Bandrac was".

Mastroval: "Captain Bandrac. Dead or alive show respect".

Uldek: "Captain Bandrac. I will admit at the time I found veteran Adullam and the Sergeant Zachariah's hostility towards him surprising, but..."

Mastroval: "What did I tell you about lying to me?"

Uldek: "What?"

Mastroval: "Not only do I know you were fully aware who Captain Lohm Bandrac was, but you also knew why someone would harbor¹⁵ murderous intentions towards him".

Commissar Mastroval walked towards Uldek and consulted his data slate.

Mastroval: "Not even the Parliate's archivists can hide from the Commissariat. I know all about the historical vendetta between House Bandrac and House Uldek, the centuries of bitter feuding and bloody reprisal¹⁶".

Uldek: "You are talking ancient history, Commissar. Those days are gone. The last House was declared renegade and banished centuries ago. We are one united..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "More lies... Confess, Uldek. You saw the hatred in Adullam and Zachariah's eyes and you reveled¹⁷ in it. Kindred spirits albeit¹⁸ from inferior bloodlines".

Uldek: "No, that's not true! I didn't even know".

Mastroval: "You saw in them allies against an ancient enemy and from that point on you conspired to hide the danger Bandrac clearly faced from own men".

Uldek: "What? I'd only just walked in".

Mastroval: "Confess! By your very inaction you protected Zachariah and allowed him to plan his murderous revenge".

Uldek: "No! You have it all wrong, it was Bandrac who sought to antagonize him and little the Serge. It was Bandrac who plotted murder. I was witness to it".

Mastroval: "Another lie".

(Mastroval moving fast and charging Uldek)

Mastroval moved in a blur. Before he could react, Uldek's left arm was up his back and the Commissar's ceremonial dagger across his throat. Uldek's rage gave way to astonishment, then terror as the blade pressed into the flesh of his neck. This man cared nothing for his past, his future or his family name.

Uldek: “As the Emperor is my witness, Commissar, I speak the truth. Not only did Captain Bandrac try to kill Zachariah at least twice, he managed to murder and injure several of my comrades in the process”.

Mastroval: “Absurd! What proof do you have of this? Not one report, not one statement do I have to such an effect in three months of training and your first campaign. Not a single allegation has been submitted or recorded”.

Uldek: “Please, Commissar! There is a very good explanation for that. If you listen to what I have to say, you will see the truth of the matter! I swear on the good name of my House”.

Mastroval (smiling sarcastically): “The good name of your House? All I see is a pattern that points directly to Sergeant Zachariah having the motive and during the final attack on Veyland Sinestre the opportunity to seek his revenge on the man he’d blamed for his own dishonor”.

Uldek paled at the mention of Veyland Sinestre . It had been his first taste of combat and it had left marks both visible and unseen on the young man. Mastroval had little sympathy.

Uldek: “Commissar, I know it is your sole intention to find the truth. For that you need to know what I heard and saw. If after hearing this you still feel the same about Sergeant Zachariah I would at least have tried my best to defend him. Please, allow me that opportunity”.

Mastroval kept his iron grip on Uldek’s hand and his blade drawn. Undeniably his words held much truth. There were gaps in the official records, gaping holes in which Mastroval’s final decision would be made. Slowly the Commissar withdrew his dagger and stepped back.

(Uldek taking a deep breath)

(Mastroval sheathing his dagger and taking several steps away)

Uldek (breathing hard): “Perhaps, I should have reported my suspicions of the Captain. What good would it have done? Bandrac controlled every aspect of the camp”.

Uldek awaited Mastroval’s permission to continue. He had been a fool to lose his temper. If it happened again, it would be the undoing of the Sergeant and if he was not careful, himself.

Uldek: “D-64 was his, Commissar. Even then he knew increasing the number of trainees was vital to his plans. We existed to fight and die and create the shining glory he so craved¹⁹. His only years in the Parliate taught him nothing of

brotherhood. To him all the recruits were utterly²⁰ disposable. Anyone who stood in his way, who cared about us as men, was a threat. And that meant the Serge”.

Mastroval: “You say, you saw and heard things. Very well, I am giving you the opportunity to share them with me, because at least one man’s life may depend upon it. But be warned, trooper Uldek. Your next outburst will be your last”.

* * *

Following my less than auspicious start Adullam and Serge had realized I could think quickly on my feet and commend²¹ respect from the other men. Within a week I had been appointed trainee squad leader.

(Valkyrie flying overhead)

One the eve of our first Cyclops demolition vehicle training day I was ordered to attend a briefing at training room Decimus.

(Uldek walking towards the room, distant voices barely heard behind the doors)

I could hear the argument from across the parade ground. As I neared the outer door of the training room’s blast door two tech-adepts stood either side. It was pretty clear they’d either be thrown out or decided to leave when the argument had started. I don’t know what made me open the outer door, but I am glad I did.

(Uldek entering the outer room)

Bandrac (arguing, barely heard): “We... at Veyland Sinestre ... Eradicate... We won...”

(Uldek entering the inner room)

Zachariah: “With all due respect, Captain. You do not have the experience to change the training program. These numbers are madness. Accelerating the schedule is one thing, but tripling the numbers... It’s beyond dangerous”.

Bandrac: “Listen to yourself, Sergeant! You sound like the coward I know you to be”.

Adullam: “By the Emperor’s grace...”

Bandrac: “Guards, if he speaks again, shoot him in the head. Your, recruit, who gave you permission to enter?”

Uldek: “I am begging your pardon, sir, but I was ordered to report here by the Sergeant”.

Bandrac (infuriated): “No, you do not answer to the Sergeant, when I am here. You answer to me, do you understand? You do as I say or I will have you executed too. Now get out”.

(Uldek leaving the inner room)

I could see Bandrac, Captain Bandrac was unstable. I feared he might have his guards execute Adullam and the Sergeant, so I waited between the inner and outer doors and activated my short-range vox.

Uldek (over vox): "Attention all Special Weapons squad personnel, report to training room Decimus at the double".

Several squad members (over vox): "Aye!"

Bandrac (behind the inner door): "You will reformat all training on Special Weapons to the numbers I have instructed and ensure it is completed in four weeks' time, not six. I want all white shield recruits through the rib-breaker by week ten and ready for combat. And I mean all".

Zachariah (behind the inner door): "Captain, didn't you learn your lesson with the grav-chute? You meddled²² with them and killed dozens of troopers not to mention the others who died through your ignorance at Veyland Sinestre".

(Special Weapons troopers entering the outer door)

Zachariah (behind the inner door): "Meddle with this training program and you could kill thousands more".

Bandrac (crying behind the inner door): "I will not tolerate this insubordination!"

(Special Weapons troopers entering the inner door)

Bandrac: "Guards, ready!"

Uldek: "Captain Bandrac, sir! Special Weapons recruits are awaiting your inspection, sir!"

Bandrac turned in fury towards the recruit, his order to fire frozen on his lips as he saw several heavily armed white shields standing to attention directly outside the training room. Uldek had jammed open both doors, allowing dust and sand to swirl in and around the Cyclops demolition vehicles being tended by the servitors.

Bandrac had to think fast. If he gave the order to shoot, it would be in front of many witnesses who could clearly see the situation inside the training room. Realizing he had been outmaneuvered Bandrac instead waved his hand towards the guard and ordered them to stand down. Switching his glare from Uldek to Zachariah he spoke in a low threatening tone.

Bandrac: "You will do as I command, Sergeant, or I will find someone to replace you. I expect a revised schedule in my hand within the hour. Is that understood?"

Zachariah: "Fully... sir".

With a nod of his head to the guards Bandrac threw a final warning glare at Adullam and Uldek, then marched out of the training room and passed through recruits.

Pausing he looked back towards the tech-adepts standing at the entrance and snapped his fingers. As Bandrac strode off, the adepts followed behind his guards towards the command center.

Uldek: "Sergeant, what... what was..."

Adullam: "None of your business, trooper. Seal the doors and dismiss the men. We will brief you within an hour when this mess has been cleaned up".

Uldek: "Yes, honored veteran. My apologies".

Zachariah: "Uldek, good work. Carry on!"

* * *

Mastroval: "So once again I am faced with another example of just how unacceptable things are on Elysia. There is little wonder both attacks on Veyland Sinestre resulted in such a catastrophic loss of life given the utter disregard for the chain of command".

Uldek: "With all... (clearing his throat) due respect, Commissar. I do not think that's fair. For thousands of years Elysia has served the Emperor faithfully. You will not find soldiers more devoted to protecting the Imperium of Man".

Mastroval: "And you will not find soldiers less devoted to their commanding officers. It's of little surprise you did not report the Sergeant and veteran for their belligerence²³. Renegades all, I would say".

Uldek: "Commissar, the Sergeant was doing what he always does, trying to protect his men as best he could. What the Captain was asking was insane. Standard drop troop training is tough enough, but to push too many men through Special Weapons and beyond. It was asking for disaster".

Mastroval: "I fear that your time swaddled in the Parliate made you naive, Uldek. (walking around) You can't imagine scale of horror that faces humanity every day. Elysia is but a tiny cog²⁴ in unimaginably large machine fighting against the extinction of mankind and every part in that machine is vital".

Uldek: "I may be young, but I know my duty to the Imperium of Mankind".

(Mastroval continuing to walk around to consult his data slate)

Mastroval: "Hm, well you have confirmed one thing at least. Based on this exchange alone Sergeant Zachariah had good cause to murder Captain Bandrac. I assume, idle barrack room gossip explained the reference to grav-chutes you heard during the confrontation?"

The expression on Uldek's face said it all. Despite Bandrac's best efforts the allegations of the Captain's tampering²⁵ with grav-chutes on the first Veyland Sinestre campaign had filtered their way down the ranks.

Mastroval: "Hm, I note from your training log you were wounded the next day in an accident".

Uldek: "It was no accident, Commissar. It was Bandrac's first attempt on the Sergeant's life, on all of our lives".

Mastroval lowered the data slate and regarded Uldek through narrowed eyes. Once again no official report to substantiate the claims of his subject, only the very men suspected of collusion²⁶ in the murder of Bandrac available for cross-examination. He could shut this very investigation right now if he wanted, terminate it on the grounds of insufficient evidence, a sea of hearsay²⁷ with the truth drowning somewhere in its depths. But no, there was something very wrong here. While Mastroval could have executed Zachariah on the confirmation of his belligerence or the facts he had unearthed about his lineage²⁸, this was a man who commanded the very deepest respect and loyalty from every person Mastroval had encountered. They were indeed all tiny cogs in a massive machine, but was Zachariah a component they could not do without in the fight against the forces of the Arch Enemy?

Mastroval: "The Emperor protects, but the Officio Prefectos delivers".

Justice had to be seen to be done.

Mastroval: "Continue, trooper".

* * *

Having been briefed on the basic operation of the Cyclops our first task was to deploy²⁹ two deactivated machines from a coordinated drop and maneuver them over a number of obstacles.

Zachariah: "Five hundred meters to the training complex landing zone, cadets. Prepare to deploy grav-chutes".

Pilot: "Give the Valkyrie room, lads! You don't want to get caught in its wake"

(wind blowing)

On the very edge of camp D-64 the cadets stood around the demolition vehicles as Zachariah gave them final instructions.

Zachariah: "Uldek, Venlin, Solbax, you with me and Alpha team. Tobin, Rolan and Paradel, you are with Adullam and Gamma team. As briefed, you shall all in turn maneuver in position of vehicle adjacent³⁰ to the structures laid out before you. Any mechanical issues, call in the tech-adepts immediately. We'll cover basic field repair later".

Adullam: "Now, listen up, grunts³¹. Under normal conditions these glorious machines would contain a ton and a half of very finest high explosive from the master artisans of the forge worlds. These might be de-acts, but they are the same weight as operational models. They'll crush your legs just as easily if you don't treat them with respect, understood?"

Cadets (together): "Aye!"

Adullam: "Tobin, you are up first".

Zachariah: "Gamma team, start your run. We'll observe, and then follow".

(Alpha and Gamma teams igniting their engines and flying high)

Uldek: "Look, Tobin, watch what you are doing!"

Tobin: "It's not as easy as it looks, Uldek. There virginal feedback from the controls".

Zachariah: "Bear in mind, these remotes are all different. Some hardly work at all, others had been patched up dozens of times. Golden rule number one: always test them out before deployment".

Adullam (smiling): "Golden rule number two, white shields: always stand before the operator".

Zachariah: "We'll take it from here, adepts".

The two tech-adepts raised their right hands on acknowledgment, their faces covered by scarlet hoods. Zachariah looked over to see Adullam with his three-strong team cursing and praising in equal measure several meters back as their Cyclops rumbled across the course.

Adullam (over vox): "Tobin, take it twenty degrees to the left and increase speed. You..."

(sudden vox interference)

Tobin (over vox): "Sorry, veteran, say again?"

Uldek (over vox): "What the..."

Adullam (over vox): "Tobin, are you messing around with the detonation links? They don't..."

(explosion going off, Adullam screaming)

Zachariah (over vox): "Adullam! Solbax, power down your unit! Uldek, check on Paradel and Tobin".

Uldek (over vox): "Sir, there is nothing left of them".

(Adullam coughing in the distance)

Zachariah (over vox): “Adullam! Specialist, report!”

Adullam (over vox, heavily coughing): “The Cyclops... they are alive!”

Zachariah (screaming over vox): “Solbax! Venlin! Get down”

(explosion going off, drop troopers coughing from the dust)

Adullam (over vox): “Solbax! Venlin! Report!”

Zachariah: “Dead”.

Adullam: “Looks like Uldek has been hit. I’ll go and check on him”.

Zachariah (to Adullam, over vox): “You go find those tech-adepts”.

Zachariah (to Uldek): “Steady there, lad. You’ll bleed out if you are not too careful. Wait for the medicae”.

Uldek: “Sergeant? What happened?”

Zachariah rose to his feet with the grim expression wiping thick red dust from his face he turned to see Adullam making his way towards them. There had been occasional malfunctions on the training ground, but two accidental detonations – impossible.

Zachariah: “Where are the adepts?”

Adullam (coughing): “Both back there. Dead”.

Zachariah: “Dead? How?”

Adullam spat dryly on the ground.

Adullam: “Shrapnel from the Cyclops cut them to pieces”.

Zachariah: “How can that be? They weren’t anywhere near the explosions”

Adullam: “No, they weren’t. Come on, white shield, let’s get you patched up”.

* * *

Mastroval: “Hm, convenient. Another situation with no witnesses outside of yourself, Adullam and the accused”.

Mastroval folded his arms and stared down at Uldek who returned his gaze without blinking. It was obvious he was telling the truth. Mastroval’s years in the Commissariat had honed³² his observation skills to a point finer than the teeth on his chainsword. More than that most of it married with the official report on the events, but again the parts that were missing were the parts that mattered.

Mastroval: “So, you contend³³ that the detonations were no accidents, but some carefully choreographed assassination attempt?”

Uldek: “I did not state that, Commissar. But I was there, the evidence...”

Mastroval (interrupting): “Is non-existent, trooper”.

Uldek: “All the proof you need was destroyed”.

Mastroval: “Proof?”

Uldek: “The tech-adepts, Commissar. I saw them. They’d been made to look as if they had been caught in the blast assuming we’d all have been dead too. They were the same two from the training room. It’s obvious, Captain Bandrac ordered them to arm the Cyclops and kill us”.

Mastroval: “Nonsense, they would have reported such an order immediately. No, this points to Zachariah. Either through incompetence or intent he was to blame for the unsanctioned arming and detonation of the vehicles. A grave waste of resources, trooper”.

Uldek: “But... The adepts were the only ones who could have reactivated the Cyclops”.

Mastroval: “Not true. Zachariah and Adullam are veterans of long standing, Uldek. Both know how to make field adaptations to a wide range of Special Weapons”.

Uldek: “That’s ridiculous!”

Mastroval (menacing): “Have a care how you speak to me, trooper”.

Uldek: “If you’d seen the adepts like I did, you’d believe me. Don’t you find it suspicious their bodies were burned before anyone could examine them? The whole thing was setup to discredit the Sergeant even in death”.

Uldek had spoken with conviction³⁴ born of truth, something the Commissar rarely saw. Breaking his gaze he looked down to the data slate in his hand.

Mastroval: “Oh, from the reports I have before me corroborated³⁵ by your very own words nothing overtly³⁶ connects Captain Bandrac to the incident”.

Uldek (taking a deep breath and making a pause): “What if I gave you incontrovertible³⁷ evidence linking Bandrac to the next attempt on our lives?”

Uldek’s face was solemn. Mastroval began to pace around the room again hiding the still active data slate behind his back. He knew exactly what was coming.

Mastroval: “I am listening”.

* * *

It was the last day of training for the replacement squad I had been given. Unfortunately my injured leg meant I would have to wait another couple of days to undertake what the manifest described as final grav-chute maneuvering. Everyone knew it better by another name.

Zachariah: "Recruits, welcome to the rib-breaker".

Uldek looked up to the dozen enormous black pylons disappearing into the sky. Arranged in a square kilometer the supports housed a series of emitters which created a random pattern of low energy beams between them. No one knew the configuration prior to jumping into the array. It was a matter for every recruit to manipulate their grav-chute thrusters and avoid the barriers as they descended. Those that hit more than a couple of beams were destined for the infirmary³⁸ and readmittance to the training cycle. Those that landed successfully could regard themselves as newly qualified Elysian drop troops ready to fight for the glory of the Emperor.

Zachariah: "Beta squad, as Uldek is currently taking an ill-deserved rest from his training I shall be accompanying you on your drop".

Uldek: "We all have been working for this moment. Remember the drill. Check your equipment during the Valkyrie ascend, make sure the tensions are correct on your webbing or you'll not walk right for a month".

Zachariah: "Squad, on me. Mount up!"

Uldek: "Veteran, do you want me to help with the retrieval on the ground?"

Adullam: "You'll be a liability³⁹. Get up to the subsidiary control room on level six. You are out of clearance to get inside, so stay on the gantry⁴⁰. There is a service conveyor in the corner pylon. You are getting a rare chance to see what's coming to you, white shield. Keep your vox on and grab a pair of field glasses".

* * *

(Uldek going up to level six and leaving the elevator)

I took my position on the gantry and watched as the Valkyries circled at three kilometers. The energy beams snapped on at different angles and heights creating a web through which my comrades would have to find their way.

Zachariah (over vox): "Beta squad, rib-breaker in ten seconds. Ready thrusters, here we go".

Adullam (over vox): "Adullam to squad, you are far too tightly bunched. You'd be an easy single target from ground level, spread out".

I could see the Sergeant was already controlling his descent, allowing the recruits to enter the web first.

Zachariah (over vox): "Break left, Four. That's it... Five, give the others room. The beams will swap⁴¹ and change, so be ready for that. Three, watch out!"

(Recruit Three moaning from electroshock)

Zachariah (over vox): "Correct your spin, Three! That's it, good"

It was then I spotted movement on the gantry diagonally opposite my position. Someone was leaving the primary control room. From that silhouette I could see it was an officer. At first I did not realize change in some of the beams was unusual. It distracted me and when I looked back the officer had disappeared into the pylon conveyor. I assumed the increase in brightness was so that they would confuse the squad. It didn't take long to realize how wrong I was.

Adullam (over vox): "Zachariah, did you order a frequency increase?"

Zachariah (over vox): "No, what's... Three!!! Fire thrusters!"

Recruit Three: "I am going to hit the bright beam, Serge! About..."

(Recruit Three screaming)

The beam cut Three in half.

Zachariah (over vox): "Squad, do not hit those brighter beams. Adullam, get them shut down now!"

Recruit Two: "Serge, this is Two. There is a safe passage on the left. If we all..."

(Recruit Two screaming)

Adullam (over vox): "By the Throne!"

Zachariah (over vox): "Squad, I am going to try to shoot at the images! Good luck!"

Adullam and the other veterans raced to the pylon control rooms, but the squad was now getting close to the ground level.

(beams slashing numerous recruits)

Zachariah (over vox): "Damn it! Going to... Try to get through... Ah"

Uldek (over vox): "Sergeant, you are nearly on ground level. Slow your descent".

Zachariah (over vox): "Almost there..."

(Zachariah landing to the ground)

Zachariah (over vox): "I am down".

Uldek (over vox): "By the Throne..."

Just as Sergeant Zachariah hit the ground, Adullam got into the primary control room. Seconds later the array powered down.

I got down there as fast as I could. Despite his own injuries the Sergeant was on his feet checking on the two recruits who had survived the drop.

One of the recruits (in the distance): "Help me out, will you please?"

A few moments later Adullam arrived.

Zachariah: "Adullam, what happened?"

Adullam: "Someone meddled with the emitters⁴². I found a burned out servitor that shouldn't have there plugged in into the generator controls. We are lucky that the entire array didn't go into cascade detonation".

Bandrac (approaching): "Sergeant, report!"

All eyes turned to watch Captain Bandrac as he strode towards Zachariah, Adullam and Uldek.

Zachariah: "The array malfunction, Captain Bandrac. We've lost four recruits. One of the survivors is badly injured".

Bandrac: "And yet you survive".

Zachariah (after a pause): "It would appear so. You got here quickly from the command center, Captain. Or were you already here?"

It was obvious to Bandrac what Zachariah was inferring⁴³. Without blinking he clicked his fingers to his six-strong honor guard.

Bandrac: "Guards, one of you go up to the primary control room and investigate".

Adullam (barely heard): "Disgrace".

Bandrac: "Be assured, men, I shall look into this unfortunate situation".

Zachariah: "Unfortunate situation? It was sabotage, Captain Bandrac, and you damn well know it".

Bandrac's guards tightened as the men closed around us, the mood getting uglier by the second.

Bandrac: "I share your fury, men. We are being attacked by the worst kind of enemy. The one unseen, the one among us".

Bandrac looked to Zachariah pushing home his point. Adullam moved forward only to be met by the muzzles of Bandrac's guard. What came next surprised everybody. I have to hand it to Bandrac, he knew how to react when things didn't go according to plan. I have not seen it done better in the halls of the Parliate .

Bandrac: "Save your anger for the enemy, men! Know this, my plans are now complete for the greatest campaign Elysia has ever seen. We are returning to Veyland Sinestre".

Drop Troopers: "What? Oh! Emperor's grace!"

Bandrac: "An entire army will descend upon the deceased and blighted home world with you as the spearhead of that invasion force. The sheer scale of my plan cannot

fail. We will not only destroy our ancient foe, but eradicate their perverse allies in one massive blow”.

Bandrac (over the microphone): “Now hear this, all personnel is to report at their briefing stations immediately! I repeat, all personnel to report at their briefing stations immediately! That is all”.

As the men dispersed, Captain Bandrac stood with his head held high, his five-strong guard surrounding him with weapons readied.

Bandrac: “And as for you three I have a reconnaissance⁴⁴ mission of the very highest priority for you to undertake. Report to the command center in one hour. Dismissed!”

* * *

Commissar Mastroval was like a statue, half-concealed in the shadows cast by the blockhouse⁴⁵’s harsh lights. It was difficult for Uldek to tell how his account of the rib-breaker had been received. That was until Mastroval cleared his throat and stepped forward with a look of disappointment on his face.

Mastroval (sighing and tutting): “Eh, trooper Uldek. It is clear your definition of incontrovertible evidence and mine differ significantly”.

Uldek: “Commissar, what more do you want from me? I saw Captain Bandrac leaving the primary control room. He appeared on the scene almost immediately after it happened. And it’s at least half an hour march from the command center. What...”

Mastroval (interrupting): “You saw an officer, you think, and even then in shadow. As for the Captain arriving so quickly, he had journeyed there to give you your mission. That was spoken of in front of a hundred witnesses. Once again you have no proof at all”.

Uldek did not know what to say. Despite presenting events exactly as they had happened Mastroval was right. Everything he had said was entirely circumstantial⁴⁶.

Mastroval: “What absolute facts do we have to consider? I’ll tell you. Two major cases of sabotage within days of each other in a high security training camp. The loss of several recruits, but far more importantly - moral dangerously affected throughout D-64 and beyond. And what links both events together? Sergeant Zachariah, veteran Adullam and recruit Uldek”.

Uldek: “That’s the first time you’ve used the word sabotage, Commissar”.

Mastroval: “You seem to think it so? If... If it was the case, the question still remains however who was or who were the saboteurs?”

Mastroval reached down and activated the data slate on the table.

Mastroval: “The official report into the incident states the maintenance servitor malfunctioned and caused the power fluctuations⁴⁷. I can see no further submissions claiming anything other than that or implicating⁴⁸ the Captain”.

Uldek: “We didn’t get the time to file any kind of report. Once Badrac learned we’d survived, he got us off the planet as quick as he could to keep us quiet”.

Mastroval: “Oh, that’s a cowardly way to view your first mission, Uldek. Again you betray your House’s worst qualities”.

Uldek (emotionally): “What Captain Bandrac sent us on wasn’t a mission, Commissar. It was a suicide run. If he couldn’t kill Zachariah on Elysia, he’d do it on active service. When we heard the mission details, we knew we wouldn’t be coming back”.

Mastroval: “And yet you did. Curious, wouldn’t you say?”

For the first time during the investigation Uldek would not make eye contact with the Commissar.

Mastroval: “Yes, keep talking, trooper. I have you now”.

* * *

In an attempt to make it look as if he wasn’t just picking us out to die, Bandrac made up a full squad with seven raw recruits. The Serge was happy to get any extra help he could. Adullam thought it to be good for my leadership skills.

(drop troopers flying aboard the Valkyrie)

Zachariah: “Uldek, report”.

Uldek: “Lookouts⁴⁹ indicate no enemy activity, Sergeant. I can’t believe we are just going to drift right through Veyland’s defenses and jump unto the planet”.

Uldek looked around the smashed hold of the Valkyrie. Stars swum past the gaping holes in its flanks, watched carefully by the strapped down troopers he had positioned as sentries. And seating in the broken cockpit, the pilot Krella had gently guided the seemingly dead ship for twelve hours towards Veyland Sinestre . Despite his fear they made Uldek proud to be Elysian.

Zachariah: “Oldest trick in the tactic, lad”.

Adullam: “Don’t worry you’ll be fighting for your life within hour. The Emperor protects, aye?”

Zachariah looked down to his data slate. What passed as intelligence on their clandestine⁵⁰ objective was useless. The only thing of clarity was Bandrac’s simple order: identify the Arch Enemy infestation and notify high command at all cost. There was no mention of an exit strategy.

Uldek: "House Lycemicus will pay for their crimes against Elysia. I swear it on the great seal of the Parliate. Veyland Sinestre will..."

Zachariah (interrupting): "We are not going to Veyland Sinestre. We are going to Samphenor".

Uldek: "Are we?"

Zachariah: "Lycemicus won't stay in the major conurbations⁵¹ on Veyland. They'll fall back to a better protected location. I'm guessing whatever abominations they call allies will do the same and we'll find them there".

Uldek: "How do you know that?"

Zachariah waved the data slate at Uldek and Adullam.

Zachariah: "I contacted Lieutenant Dewfalco, told him of the mission we'd been sent on. He saw it for what it was, a way for Bandrac to get rid of us for good. He asked if he could help. I asked for the transcripts of his Lycemicus hostage interrogations. They didn't give away much before they died, but there are clues here that Bandrac's missed".

Adullam: "I don't see how that improves things for us, Sergeant".

Zachariah: "I am not letting Bandrac get away with this, Adullam. I don't care so much what he is trying to do to me, to us. But if he leads another assault on Veyland, it'll make the first look like a barrack room brawl⁵². We've got to succeed in this mission".

Adullam looked at the squad around him. Eight recruits, one with an injury and two veterans against... what? Bandrac might as well have lined them against the wall and be done with it.

Zachariah: "Lycemicus will know we are readying superior numbers for an attack. What worries me is how they are going to reinforce against them?"

Adullam: "Pirates we can deal with. Anything else...".

Zachariah: "Is our mission to find out..."

Mirdolon: "Serge? Ship's approaching".

Zachariah: "Damn it. But we are nearly in orbit. Let's hope this one doesn't use us for target".

(Another ship hitting Elysians' Valkyrie)

Krella: "Zachariah, we are spinning away and he's coming around for another pass. If I fire he'll know we are not as dead as we look".

Uldek: "Sergeant, we are going to be torn apart. We've just lost two..."

Zachariah: "Look to your men, trooper. Squad, get ready to evacuate. Krella, keep your angle as to minimize damage and send us to the planet".

Krella: "I'll see what I can do, but I can't make it obvious I've still got power. Oh, here he comes".

(Enemy ship passing by the Valkyrie)

Krella: "He is not following us down. Get out while you can".

Zachariah: "Squad, unlatch53 and egress54 immediately! Go! Good work, Krella. The Emperor protects"

Krella: "I... hope... so..."

* * *

We managed to land on Samphenor undetected thanks to Krella's actions. However we'd lost three men in the attack and I had my own problems.

Zachariah: "You've landed heavily, Uldek. How's the leg holding up?"

Uldek: "Hurts like hell, Serge, but I won't slow you down. All troopers, on me. Thank the Emperor for this storm. Where to, Sergeant?"

Zachariah swept his auspex in a wide arc. Samphenor was a rocky barren55 wilderness of ridges56 and ravines57, harsh and unforgiving. But it was the sky that was worrying the others.

Mirdolon: "Serge? Should the heavens be that color?"

Zachariah looked to the brooding58 clouds. Their sickly green hue59 roiling60 into browns and reds added to a feeling of desolation61 and malevolence62, ready to engulf63 all in a shroud of despair.

Zachariah: "Don't worry about the atmospheric conditions, Mirdolon. Keep your eyes peeled64 and weapons ready. Follow me and keep to the shadows!"

Adullam: "Serge, behind that ridge something is on fire".

Zachariah: "Damn it. It's between us and the main compound65".

(weird screeching voices in the distance)

Mirdolon: "What was that?"

Zachariah: "Quiet, Mirdolon".

Adullam looked to Zachariah. They'd heard it before during the first assault on Veyland Sinestre, when the enemy had attacked. But this was stronger, louder and far more threatening.

(weird screeching voices in the distance)

Mirdolon: "It's true what they say about Lycemicus. They are cannibals. We'll all be killed".

Adullam (interrupting): "That's enough, Mirdolon. Whatever it is, we are more than a match for it, aye lads?"

Zachariah: "It'll take hours to go around at base level. If we climb, we might be able to find a quicker route".

Adullam: "Well, less time we spend here, the better. Come on then, its time you showed the 158th what you can do".

(Elysians climbing the ridge, earth crumbling under foot)

Zachariah: "Emperor, preserve us!"

Uldek: "What depravity⁶⁶ is this? What are they doing?"

Uldek could not believe his eyes. In the valley below a dozen altars have been hewn⁶⁷ from Samphenor's ebony rock. Dark inhuman shapes slid in and out of the shadows from countless fires arranged around the ritual space descending upon the humans tied to the platforms to claim them for their abominable gods. In the distance hundreds of pirate militiamen from House Lycemicus bore witness to the atrocity, some cheering wildly, other staring open mouth, transfixed at the horror before them.

(distant screeching laughter)

It was clear not all had embraced the darkness willingly.

Zachariah: "This is the price of their pact. They are paying with their very souls".

Uldek: "May House Lycemicus be cursed for a thousand years! This canker⁶⁸ must be destroyed before it infects Elysia"

(distant heavy treading sounds)

Adullam: "Zachariah, do you hear that?"

Zachariah: "I... I do..."

Zachariah swept his sniper rifle away from the vile sacrum before him and as his scope reached the crowd it suddenly parted to form a corridor through which three huge shapes lumbered into view.

Uldek: "Space Marines..."

Zachariah: "Worse, lad... Much worse"

Zachariah saw the flames mirror in their arterial red armor, the smoke from the incense⁶⁹ burners on the largest figure mingling⁷⁰ with the pyres before them. As it

swept a mighty barbed scepter before it, the abomination appeared satisfied with the torment laid out as a writhing feast of suffering.

(distant screeching laughter)

In that instant Zachariah realized the mortal danger this world faced.

Zachariah: "We got what we came for. Let's get out!"

(Mirdolon falling over the ridge)

Adullam: "Mirdolon's fallen!"

Zachariah: "Return fire!"

Adullam: "They are coming for us, Serge"

Through his sniper scope Zachariah could see two Chaos Space Marines running across the valley towards them, firing as they went. Behind and around them pirate militia were taking up arms and streaming out of the valley.

Zachariah: "We can't do anything against this fire power! Back down the slope now!"

(Elysians going down the slope, earth crumbling underfoot)

(distant explosion)

Zachariah: "Uldek, take point! Adullam, take the rear... We..."

Adullam: "Hold up, troopers! Covering fire! We could hold off these but we will be no match for the Space Marines, Serge. What's the plan?"

Zachariah: "Krella, come in!"

Adullam: "He can't have made it, Sergeant. Not even Krella could have gone out of that spin".

Zachariah looked to the darkness stretching out before him. In the near distance he could see a sheet of rock stretching up into the sky like a broken fang in a diseased mouth.

Zachariah: "We'll head for that high ground. I'll be able to transmit a signal from there. Hope somebody will be listening".

Adullam: "Troopers, over to that ridge! Uldek, can you keep up?"

Uldek: "I'll give covering fire, veteran. Don't worry about me. I'll make it".

Zachariah (over vox): "This is a priority message for command center Epsilon. Code 1-8-58. Be advised..."

Adullam: "Troopers, incoming!"

Zachariah: "Be advised, enemy forces comprise traitor Space Marines, mutants, dozens of them. By the Throne!"

Adullam: "Into that crater! Move!"

Uldek: "I am out of ammo!"

Adullam: "Stand your ground, trooper!"

Zachariah: "Give them grenades! Draw bayonets! Give them cold steel, brothers!"

(Elysians engaging the mutants in close combat)

Zachariah: "Let's take as many of these abominations as we can".

Adullam: "Emperors, protect us!"

Krella (over vox): "Krella to Zachariah! I have a fix on your position. Prepare for immediate extraction".

(mutants growling and screaming)

Zachariah (over vox): "Negative, Krella. It's too dangerous for you to land. Relay the message and may the Throne preserve you".

Krella (over vox): "I'm going to try to flow past. After that hold on, just hold on".

(murderous battle raging around the slope)

* * *

Mastroval: "Hm, that's quite a story, trooper".

Commissar Mastroval stood before Uldek arms folded, eyes shadowed by the short peak of his cap. Something had changed in his demeanor⁷¹, a feeling of satisfaction, of an achievement long fought for and finally realized. Uldek did not like it at all.

Uldek: "Not a story, Commissar. The truth, which this time can be attested⁷² to by the pilot of the Valkyrie".

Mastroval nodded down to the data slate on the table.

Mastroval: "I have read the reports, Uldek. I know you tell the truth and for that you have confirmed everything I had suspected about Sergeant Zachariah".

Uldek: "What do you mean by that?"

Mastroval (walking around): "Did it not strike you as suspicious that Sergeant Zachariah could safely get you onto such an impossible objective?"

Uldek: "The plan was a sound one, Commissar, and not without its dangers".

Mastroval: "And this additional information from Lieutenant Dewfalco's prisoners... Their vivisection⁷³ was most persuasive, but there was no mention of Samphenor".

Uldek: "I... I don't see what..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "So you have to ask yourself, trooper Uldek. How did Zachariah know the best place for you to drop on to was Samphenor?"

Uldek: "Many veterans have been on campaigns against the pirate dynasties. He obviously..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "No, there have been no reported missions to Samphenor. There has been no updated information on its geography or infrastructure for over a hundred years".

Uldek: "Surely..."

Mastroval: "Zachariah knows of Samphenor because he is an agent of the Ruinous Powers. He recognized the renegade Astartes because he was sent by them to sabotage this training camp, disrupt the attack on Veyland Sinestre ... and murder Captain Bandrac".

Uldek (shocked): "That's... That's not possible".

Mastroval: "No? Think about what you've told me, Uldek"

Uldek (mumbling): "But... But why did he save me? I don't understand".

Mastroval: "To do exactly what you've done up until now. Deflect the blame from him so he could finish his mission".

It was time to push Uldek towards the precipice⁷⁴ of his loyalty to Zachariah and see which way he jumped.

Mastroval: "You were not aware of this, but I was called here by Bandrac when you returned from Samphenor. The Captain suspected the same about Zachariah as I. By the time I arrived he had been murdered".

For the first time there was an expression of doubt on Uldek's face.

Mastroval: "Think about it. Could it be true?"

Uldek (unsure): "Have I been protecting an enemy of Elysia?"

Mastroval: "As we speak, Sergeant Zachariah sits in chains awaiting his own questioning. If you have lied, I will soon discover it. And know this, Pillya Uldek".

Mastroval straightened and unsheathed his ceremonial dagger.

Mastroval: "If he confirms what I believe to be the truth, both of your heads will be mounted on the Parliate gates to show the whole of Elysia what fate befalls those who betray the Emperor. You are dismissed".