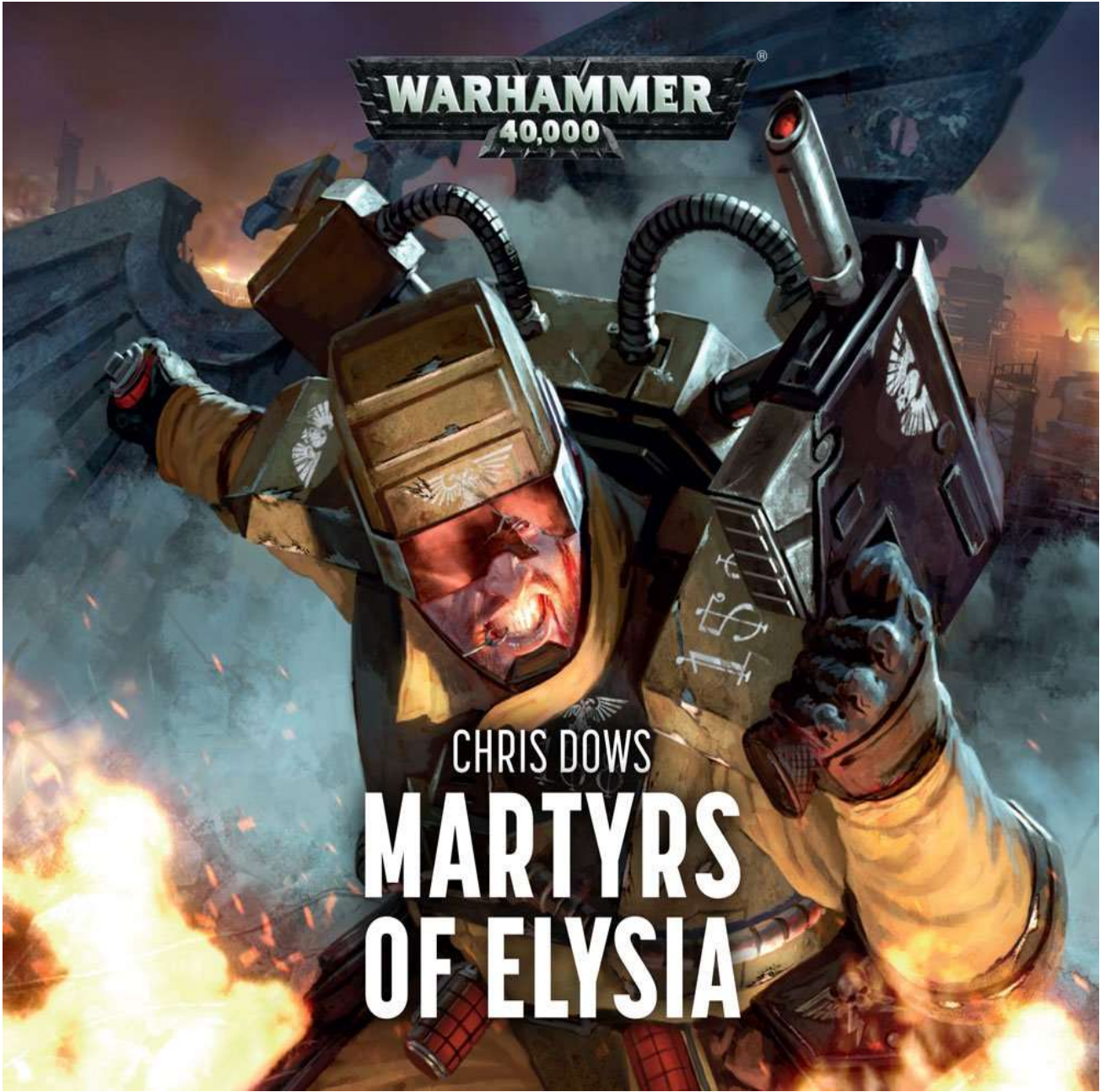


WARHAMMER
40,000

CHRIS DOWS

**MARTYRS
OF ELYSIA**



MARTYRS OF ELYSIA (2018)

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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;
- * Shendrick Mastroval – Commissar;
- * Pillya Uldek – Trooper;
- * Lohm Badrak – Captain of the 158th Elysian drop troop unit;
- * Dewfalco - Lieutenant of the 217th Elysian drop troop unit.
- * Felden – Captain of the 239th Cadian regiment.

Mastroval: “I shall tell you about veteran Sergeant Zachariah. He is no hero. He is a liar, a collaborator¹ shielded by the misguided loyalty of his brothers in arms. He is deceitful, murderous. He serves no one but his depraved² masters and wants nothing less than the fall of Elysia. This day be in no doubt, I will show him to be a traitor and a murderer”.

If Commissar Mastroval’s words had affected the veteran, he did not show it. Freed of his shackles Zachariah sat as he had for the last three hours motionless and relaxed.

Mastroval: “Your self-control does not impress me, even if you are Elysia’s greatest sniper. If anything, Sergeant, your silence condemns you further by the second. Then again what will be the point of you denying your guilt? Your vendetta against Captain Bandrac is well documented and corroborated³”

The merest⁴ twitch as the Sergeant’s lips confirmed Mastroval’s point had been made.

Mastroval (walking around Sergeant): “Veteran Adullam confirmed the roots of your feud with Bandrac up until your posting to this camp. And despite his best efforts to protect you, trooper Uldek was a wealth of incriminating⁵ information. You have no comrades, Zachariah. You have no friends. For the good of the 158th, Elysia and the Emperor you claim to serve, confess your crimes. I have no doubt you are aware I can make you talk”.

Zachariah (gasping): “Let us hope the information you get is more accurate than that extracted from Dewfalco’s Veyland Sinestre advisors”.

Mastroval (sarcastically): “Ah, at last the traitor speaks”.

Zachariah: “I am no traitor, Commissar. If you believe that then you are a fool”.

(Mastroval grasping his bolt pistol and approaching Zachariah)

Mastroval (menacing): “Speak to me like that again, veteran”.

Zachariah: “If you are already certain of my guilt, execute me now. Unless you know there is more to be told”.

Mastroval (taking away the bolt gun): “Perhaps. Do you deny your confrontations with Captain Bandrac during the rescue on Uldarax and here at the camp? Your hostility towards him? No? That was your motivation, plain and simple”.

Zachariah: “That’s one interpretation”.

Mastroval: “The only one from my perspective. What of your actions during the second offensive on Veyland Sinestre and the destruction of grav-platform, hm? You deliberately hunted down Captain Bandrac, such was your fury”.

Zachariah: “I was angry, Commissar. Such colossal stupidity would have tested the resolve⁶ of any soldier”.

Mastroval: “Not just any soldier would slit the throat of their commanding officer”.

Zachariah (gasping, trying to calm himself): “When I arrived Captain Bandrac was almost dead. I fought through pirates from House Lycemicus and worse to reach him. He could have died at the hands of a thousand corrupted souls”.

Mastroval (leering over Sergeant): “There was no ostensible⁷ taint on Bandrac’s body. He was killed cleanly by a practiced hand”.

Zachariah: “Impossible”.

Mastroval drew a compact data slate from the inside of his long coat and placed it on the table in front of Zachariah.

Mastroval: “Do you see the title of this data file, veteran?”

Zachariah: “Dark Elysian sons. What of it?”

Mastroval: "Do you what the file contains?"

Zachariah: "How would I?"

Mastroval: "It contains secrets buried so deep I almost couldn't recover them. You seem agitated⁸, veteran Sergeant. Tell me of your penultimate⁹ meeting with Captain Bandrac".

Zachariah: "Penultimate? The one before..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "You murdered him... Following the mission briefing aboard the Majestic Light. I understand it was even more ill-tempered than the previous encounters".

Zachariah: "It is well documented, Commissar. Why are you..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "I want to hear it from your perspective, Sergeant. It is a chance to recount your version of events. Do not squander¹⁰ it".

* * *

Bandrac (in the distance): "I am Captain Lohm of the House Bandrac".

It was clear that everyone was surprised when we returned from our reconnaissance mission to Samphenor. Bandrac refused to meet with us even though our intelligence on the Chaos Space Marines had been hard won. Bandrac didn't even acknowledge us when we entered the briefing room on the Majestic Light. He was too caught up in his master plan to take Veyland Sinestre with overwhelming force. Up until that point we had no idea how he intended to do it. But once we found out, we realized it was going to be an even bigger disaster than the first attack.

Bandrac: "As you know, the generals and I in our wisdom have kept it secret. But now I can reveal our forces are to be supported by an entire Cadian regiment, who will provide the overwhelming numbers required to ensure victory. Detailed orders will be issued shortly before planet fall. Questions?"

Zachariah: "Captain, how will we deploy the Cadians? Drop ships would make them easy targets".

(officers starting to whisper)

Bandrac: "We will employ gravity cone platforms for a mass drop combined with our own troops".

Zachariah's sharp eyes caught a shaking of heads from the senior officers assembled in the Majestic Light's briefing room. Whatever argument they had mounted prior to the announcement of this mission against the use of platforms had clearly failed.

Bandrac: "This concludes the briefing. Dismissed".

(officers leaving the room)

Adullam: "Serge, you have to say something".

Uldek: "Veteran Adullam, what's the problem?"

Adullam: "Have you been on a gravity cone platform, Uldek?"

Uldek: "No..."

Zachariah: "Captain Bandrac, a moment!"

(Guardsmen issuing a growling sound)

Zachariah's attempt to reach the Captain was immediately blocked by his six-strong honor guard.

Guardsmen (grimly): "Stand aside, veteran".

Bandrac: "Ah, the hero of the hour. Let him pass".

(Zachariah approaching Bandrac)

Bandrac: "Well, speak".

Zachariah: "Captain Bandrac, you must be aware that even under the best conditions gravity cone platforms are unstable. Veyland Sinestre's fields are too unpredictable".

Bandrac: "Of course, you would know all about their fields, wouldn't you, Sergeant?"

Zachariah: "Explain, sir".

Bandrac: "I have grave suspicions about you, veteran. Suspicions I have shared with those who will find the truth behind Sergeant Zachariah and where his loyalties really lie".

(beeping sound)

Voice (announcing over a microphone): "Now hear this, we are approaching the demarcation point. All troopers to their assigned stations".

(beeping sound)

Bandrac: "Have a care around this man, soldiers. The enemy can take many forms".

Zachariah (in anger): "You dare..."

Winded by an unexpected blow from the guard's rifle Zachariah stumbled back and grabbed the hilt¹¹ of his sword. Seeing the move Adullam seized his comrade's wrist before the blade could be unsheathed¹².

Zachariah (breathing hard in anger): "I'll kill him..."

Adullam: "Let him go, Serge..."

* * *

Mastroval: "I'll kill him... I'll kill him..."

Mastroval found it amusing that the veteran admitted to using those words, probably assuming the Commissar held this information in one of his reports. In reality he did not and the statement gave him the perfect opportunity to steer¹³ his questioning in the direction he wanted it to go.

Mastroval: “So, Bandrac tampers¹⁴ with your squad’s equipment and kills your men. He tries to blow you into pieces with the reactivated Cyclops, attempts to cut you in half with sabotaged energy beams and sends you on a mission to your certain death... allegedly. All these are things you claim he’s done to you and your men. Yet how do you react? A court¹⁵ word, a surly¹⁶ look.

(Mastroval keeps walking around Sergeant)

Mastroval: “Yet one question about your loyalties and you fly into a murderous rage. What am I to make of that?”

Zachariah: “I am surprised it took so long for Bandrac to cast doubt on my allegiance in his quest to discredit me. Surely you’ve been upon Elysia long enough to realize how it works, Commissar”.

Mastroval: “Indeed I have. By attacking the character of an individual you can inflict wounds on the person. To suggest anything but loyalty to Elysia and family, that can be a killing blow”.

Zachariah: “Families are the curse of Elysia. Had I been higher born, perhaps, my words would have been heeded¹⁷. So many dead”.

Mastroval: “Ah, yes... A dreadful loss of life on the very same platform you were tasked to control”

Zachariah: “I warned them that would happen and it did”.

* * *

(tech-priests chanting incantations to the God Machine)

Adullam: “Throne, Serge! We are dangerously overloaded, listen to those engines”.

Crammed¹⁸ within its raised perimeter barriers the 2000-strong Cadian and Elysian assault forces swayed¹⁹ with the jarring²⁰ movement of the floating disc kept aloft²¹ by six huge turbines arranged equidistant²² around its edge.

Zachariah: “There goes the spearhead²³. With any luck we won’t be up here for much longer”.

Adullam: “If those turbines give way we definitely won’t be”.

Zachariah: “I pray they Machine God hears the tech-priests’ incantations²⁴”.

Adullam: “Perhaps, Bandrac is warming to us, Serge. He didn’t send us down to Veyland Sinestre with the first wave”.

(fighter flying over the platform)

Before he could answer his comrade Zachariah spotted Lieutenant Dewfalco of 217th marching towards them. He had been given the dubious²⁵ honor of coordinating the drop from platform Epsilon, the most decrepit²⁶ of the six gravity cone platforms.

Dewfalco: "Sergeant, what's the delay? The last of the forward assault force are descending in the drop ships now".

Zachariah: "We are ready to go, sir, but Epsilon is still not in position. They are going to struggle to keep the landing zone secure for us, Lieutenant".

Dewfalco: "We need to swamp²⁷ the area with troops within minutes if this plan has any chance of succeeding. If we aren't able to and the attack is sped out, the impact will be weaker and a greater danger to us all".

Adullam: "I don't like this, sir. Six gravity cone platforms in such close proximity act as one enormous target".

Dewfalco: "Agreed. You, trooper!"

(Uldek approaching)

Trooper Uldek who had been tasked with long range vox by Zachariah was beckoned²⁸ over by Lieutenant.

Uldek: "Yes, sir".

Dewfalco: "Ask command how much longer it will be before we are in final deployment position!"

Uldek: "Acknowledged, sir".

Zachariah: "You know Captain Badrac's personally directing this remote piloting of the platforms, don't you, Lieutenant?"

Dewfalco threw an unsurprised look Zachariah's way.

Adullam: "Pf, that explains why they are too bloody close together".

Dewfalco: "Enough, veteran Adullam.; Concentrating the men into a small landing zone is key to Bandrac's deployment".

Adullam: "Landing zone... Killing zone more like!"

Zachariah: "Stand down, veteran. That's an order".

Dewfalco: "You heard the Sergeant and besides you should show some respect for your new Colonel".

Zachariah: "What?"

Dewfalco: "Bandrac received a field promotion a few hours ago".

Adullam (spitting): "Of course he did".

Dewfalco: "Enemy fighter enclosing! Engage auto-cannons!"

Zachariah: "Scatter, lads!"

Adullam: "There nowhere for them to go!"

Zachariah: "Lieutenant, look out!"

(Enemy fighter unleashing a salvo of shots)

(Dewfalco screaming being shot)

Caught in the densely packed troops Zachariah's warning was in vain. As the enemy fighters strafed²⁹ platform Epsilon killing Dewfalco and dozens of Cadians in a hail of fire. Banking³⁰ away the platform's auto-cannons blazed into the belly of the attack ship, destroying its port³¹ engine.

Uldek: "Sergeant, command reports, seven minutes so station keeping".

Zachariah: "We won't last two more minutes, let alone seven".

Adullam: "Serge, the enemy fighter is diving back towards turbine fore³²".

Zachariah: "You men, get away from there... Get down!"

(explosion, screams of wounded soldiers)

Zachariah: "Adullam, we need to get those troops off here now".

Adullam: "Two drop patches have been damaged by the fighter. And the platform is still not in position".

Zachariah: "In the Emperor's name".

A platform Epsilon shuddered³³ to right itself, mangled³⁴ bodies and chunks of debris skidded past the troops trying to keep their footing. Packed to the platform Epsilon was Zachariah could see they had lost scores of men in the enemy attack. And two of the auto-cannons burned fiercely in the background.

Zachariah (over vox): "This is veteran Sergeant Zachariah of the 158th Elysian. Any senior officer, please respond".

Uldek: "Platforms Alpha and Gamma are deploying. The others are nearly in position, but there are more enemy fighters coming in".

Felden (over vox): "This is Captain Felden of the 239th Cadian. All Elysian senior officers incapacitated³⁵ or dead. I am nearly at your location".

Zachariah (over vox): "Understood".

Felden (approaching): "Sergeant, what's the situation?"

Zachariah: "We need the gravity cons activating and hatches opening now, sir".

Felden: "I'll master the men, give the order to the tech-priests".

Zachariah: "Yes, sir".

As navy Vultures wheeled overhead to increase the gravity platform's air cover, Zachariah pushed his way through the rapidly forming ranks to a badly injured tech-priest.

Tech-Priest: "Omnessaitos Santens Abortis. All praise Machine!"

Zachariah: "We need to evacuate this platform right now".

Disregarding Zachariah's urgency, the tech-priest continued his prayers as he moved a blackened hand over a series of controls.

Tech-Priest: "Gravity generator engaged. The Machine is all. Laudet Omnis Machina!"

Zachariah weaved³⁶ his way past the arrowhead-shaped assemblies of troops organized by Captain Felden. At the head of each queue the circular hatches through which the Cadians would descend to the landing zone began to open across the platform.

Uldek: "Command report, enemy fighters have broken through. They are heading for platform Beta".

Zachariah (over vox): "Captain Felden, are your troops ready to deploy?"

Felden (over vox): "Ready, but the grav cones are fluctuating wildly".

Zachariah (over vox): "There is nothing we can do about it. I'll be sending squads down that side every count. Try to keep your men on track. But the sooner they get into them, the better".

Felden (over vox): "Understood. The Emperor protects".

Uldek: "Sergeant, the first Cadians from platform Alpha have landed on Veyland to heavy resistance. They need immediate help".

(explosion)

Adullam: "Beta's hit!"

Zachariah: "Emperor's Throne!"

With four engines gone Beta tipped³⁷ violently downwards throwing Cadians and Elysians over its perimeter. Beneath it the generator cons of antigravity flickered and died spilling scores of Cadians from their conical paths in a free fall. The platform began to descend straight towards Epsilon.

Zachariah (over vox): "Attention, all Cadian squads, emergency deployment! Elysian squads, to your positions! Move!"

Adullam: "Epsilon is still not in position over the landing zone, Serge".

Zachariah: "This will have to be close enough. (over vox) Captain Felden, deploy now".

Felden (over vox): "We'll be going through much faster than planned, lads. Keep in the center of the field as best you can, then get out as soon as you land".

Uldek (over vox): "Beta will strike us before we evacuate with all the Cadians".

Zachariah: "Adullam, follow me to that autocannon. Uldek, prepare a squad to drop".

Uldek (over vox): "Yes, Sergeant!"

Zachariah: "We need to buy time for the deployment. Can you disengage the cannons auto-tracking sensors?"

Zachariah pushed the dead gunner and loader from their seats as Adullam kicked in a service man and pulled out a bundle³⁸ of wires.

Adullam: "The machine spirit is not going to like this one bit. May your revered safeties permit this override from your unworthy servant who craves your indulgence³⁹ in this time of need. Thou art the holiest weapon of war, thy sacred duty will be fulfilled".

Zachariah: "Just load all the ammunition we have left. I am going to concentrate fire at Beta's closest turret and try to detonate its magazine".

Adullam: "Weapon is ready".

(alarm going off)

Zachariah ignored the fighters screaming all around, the wail of the proximity alarm and the constant stream of troops throwing themselves into the gravity cone hatches below and behind him. All that mattered was the auto-cannon turret aimed at Beta's crippled⁴⁰ deserted platform.

Adullam: "Target is locked. I don't know how long my override will last, Serge".

Zachariah (shooting at Beta): "I pray to thee, almighty Omnisiah, grant us victory over the forces of darkness. Laudet Omnis Machina!"

(Beta exploding)

Adullam: "Good work, Serge!"

Zachariah: "Not good enough! The large section is going to be coming".

Adullam: "We've lost another turbine".

Adullam and Zachariah jumped from the turret onto the bottom surface of Epsilon platform, losing their footing and rolling to the ground. Across the circular expanse the few remaining Cadians lurched⁴¹ and staggered⁴².

Zachariah (over vox): "Captain Felden! We need to abandon this platform".

Felden (over vox): "Last men are jumping now".

Zachariah (over vox): "Acknowledged. Squad, grav-harnesses quickly. Keep an eye on those gravity cones. As soon as the platform's power wanes⁴³, they'll dissipate⁴⁴".

As platform Gamma exploded, Zachariah watched with fury.

Zachariah: "Thousands lost before they even had the chance to fight. This is no way for good men and women to die".

Adullam: "Serge, nothing more can be done. Epsilon is doomed".

Only a couple of hundred Cadians remained on Epsilon platform. As the last of his men exited the closest hatch, Captain Felden gave Zachariah a salute and threw himself into the circular opening set into the floor. Zachariah saluted back, connected his rebreather, then readied himself at the platform's edge.

Zachariah: "If the cones fail, attempt to rescue as many Cadians as you can, but do not put your own life in jeopardy⁴⁵".

(Zachariah and Adullam screaming while jumping off the platform)

Zachariah fell alongside the crackling energy field of the gravity cone. Inside he could see an endless line of Cadians descending at speed, their shapes made hazy⁴⁶ by the translucent⁴⁷ barrier.

Adullam: "Serge, the gravity cones are malfunctioning".

Zachariah: "Get ready, men! Pick an individual and track them as close as you can".

Adullam: "Any second".

Zachariah: "Now!"

Everywhere Zachariah looked, bodies were falling, clawing and spinning in the thin air as they saw their death hurtle⁴⁸ towards them. While all Elysian drop troops practiced aerial rescue they were dangerous under ideal circumstances. But with wreckage raining down around them the task became near impossible.

Zachariah: "That looks like Felden! (over vox) Captain I am heading straight towards you".

(Zachariah catching Felden in midair, Felden moaning indecipherably)

Zachariah (over vox): "Felden, calm down!"

As Zachariah tried to stop them spinning he reached for a carbine attached to his grav-harness and latched ⁴⁹it onto Felden's webbing.

Felden (over vox): "My men! Save my men!"

Zachariah (over vox): "We'll do the best we can, sir! Hold on, we will be down in a few seconds".

(Felden breathing hard, almost in panic)

Zachariah pulled on the harness straps drawing Felden closer to his body. Directly beneath them he saw one of his squad do the same only to be suddenly flung to one side and accelerate downwards.

Zachariah (over vox): "Mind your bodies from these gravity wells, men!"

Adullam (over vox): "Managed to get one, Serge! There's hostile fire from below!"

Zachariah (over vox): "Brace50 yourself, Captain!"

* * *

Mastroval: "Extraordinary! Of all the troops present you were the only one to identify the gravity wells".

Zachariah: "We all witnessed the effect, Commissar. I alerted them after they had claimed dozens of lives".

Mastroval (walking around Sergeant): "Which is more than can be said about your mission to Uldarax. Veteran Adullam couldn't explain how you knew about the gravity passage between Veyland Sinestre and the planetoid on which Bandrac was stranded51. He also couldn't explain how you knew the direction of the invisible field was indicated by striations52 on the rocks. All that would take you straight to the crash site. How did you know?"

Zachariah: "May I remind you, Commissar. The Uldarax mission was to rescue the man I am accused of murdering".

Mastroval: "Oh, do you really think you can distract my questioning with such ease, Sergeant? You insult me".

Zachariah (emotionally): "I am the one who is insulted. I succeeded in saving Bandrac. On and off that bloody platform I tried to protect as many men as possible. Both times I did my duty. Does it matter how?"

Mastroval: "It matters a great deal, veteran. It matters because you seem to know a lot about things you should not. The gravity wells are one thing but Chaos Space Marines also?"

Zachariah looked up sharply. He had not expected this.

Mastroval: "You identified them on your scouting mission with ease".

Zachariah: "I have... encountered them before".

Mastroval: "Tell me about Ophel Minoris".

Zachariah: "What of it?"

Mastroval: "According to the official records you not only engaged with several Chaos Space Marines during your attack on the alien monolith, but were successful in dispatching a number of them. That's quite a feat".

Zachariah: "It wasn't just me".

Mastroval: "No, the only other survivor was Adullam".

Zachariah: "We barely escaped with our lives. It took us months to recover after..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "Perhaps, the taint of Chaos has been upon you since then. I imagine you chose to join them in exchange for your miserable lives and when the time came for you to serve your new masters, they shared their knowledge of Veyland's gravity wells and the geography of Uldarax and Samphenor".

Zachariah: "That is..."

Mastroval (interrupting): "Perhaps, the incidents here at the training camp, Bandrac's assassination, the huge loss of life during both attacks on Veyland Sinestre were your doing?"

Zachariah: "Absurd".

Mastroval: "Did the forces of Chaos recruit both you and Adullam back on Ophel Minoris? Was this all part of some vile masterplan?"

Zachariah (angrily): "Is that what it says in your data files, Commissar? That I'd been working in collusion with heretics? I never wanted to return to Elysia. The further I am away from this cursed planet, the better".

Mastroval (tutting): "That's no way to speak of your beloved home world, is it?"

Zachariah's stomach fell. Despite his greatest efforts, he knew the panic in his eyes betrayed him.

Mastroval: "Tell me of the events leading up to your arrest, veteran".

* * *

(Elysians deep in the middle of a raging battle)

Zachariah: "Uldek, where are the reinforcements?"

Before the young coms-operator could respond, Zachariah spotted a winged creature heading directly towards his squad.

Zachariah: "Watch out!"

The leather-winged creature plowed into the Elysians lashing out with its razor-sharp claws.

Adullam: "What in Throne's name is that?"

Zachariah: "I didn't see them on our scouting mission. Emperor, protect us all".

Adullam: "Nor did I. Quite the hellpath pirate friends have got".

Uldek: "Sergeant, new orders are coming in. Reinforcements have overshoot⁵⁵ the landing zone. They encountered two Chaos Space Marines but have eliminated the enemy... with heavy losses".

Zachariah: "We needed those men to form a second offensive⁵⁶. Get ones left to converge⁵⁷ on our position".

Uldek: "Bandrac has retasked our mission, Sergeant. We are to head straight for the citadel and support his attack on the high temple of Lycemicus".

Adullam: "Is he out of his mind? It's the most heavily defended structure on this Emperor forsaken rock".

Uldek: "Bandrac is pushing to capture or kill Lycemicus himself".

Adullam: "Serge, are you all right?"

Felden (over vox): "Sergeant, Zachariah, report".

Zachariah (over vox): "Go ahead, Captain Felden".

Felden (over vox): "Glad to hear you are still with us, Sergeant. We are on the western flank of the citadel, but need explosives. Our specialist team is dead. Can you assist?"

Adullam: "Serge?"

Zachariah (over vox, after a pause): "Yes... We... Felden, we are on our way. (to other Elysians) Men, follow me!"

(Elysians setting on a run)

Zachariah and his men pushed on thorough the pirate militia and Chaos forces. Exiting a shallow valley onto a sprawling⁵⁸ plain the squad could see the huge black wall of the citadel in the distance and a sea of Cadian troops engaged with the pirate militia at its perimeter.

Zachariah: "There's the western flank! We'll head up towards..."

From nowhere three winged creatures descended upon them.

Zachariah: "Adullam! Get over to Felden at the western wall. Let the navy fighters match those creatures. The eastern flanks are unprotected. Follow me!"

As the squad of Elysians ran towards the citadel's wall, one of the demons swooped⁵⁹ into the path of a low flying navy fighter.

Zachariah (over vox): "Take cover!"

(navy fighter exploding overhead)

Zachariah (over vox): "Uldek, inform all Imperial forces that the citadel wall has been breached from its eastern boundary".

Uldek (over vox): "Yes, Sergeant. Attention all units, this is Epsilon 158".

Nearing the hole in the citadel wall Zachariah was relieved to see Cadian and Elysian troops converging on the position.

Zachariah (over vox): "All troopers, fast and low towards the breach. Don't allow them to get a foothold. Fire!!!"

Elysians (unleashing torrents of lasfire): "For Elysia!"

Zachariah (over vox): "Adullam, I am entering the citadel now. How long before you..."

(an explosion preventing Zachariah from finishing)

Adullam (over vox): "We've gained access, Serge. Any sign of Bandrac?"

Bandrac (over vox): "This is Colonel Bandrac, I am at the high temple and encountering near overwhelming resistance. All previous orders are countermanded. Get here now!"

Zachariah (over vox): "I guess that answers your question, veteran. We are on our way".

Adullam (over vox): "Understood".

Having fought their way into the citadel Zachariah and his men found themselves in a huge stone corridor flanked by the outer and inner walls of the mighty fortress.

Zachariah (over vox): "Split left and right. It's equidistant to the temple from the here and we don't want to get caught..."

(an explosion preventing Zachariah from finishing)

(Zachariah moaning)

Zachariah (over vox): "Return fire!"

(Elysians unleashing torrents of lasfire)

Zachariah (coughing, over vox): "Uldek, report!"

Uldek (over vox): "I am OK, Serge, but we've suffered multiple casualties".

Zachariah (over vox): "Damn it. You two, troopers, this way".

Adullam (over vox): "Serge, the high temple is surrounded. Bandrac must be inside. We'll have to find our way in, but the approach is wide open".

Zachariah (over vox): "I am four-strong here. We'll head to the high temple's rampart⁶¹ and cover from there. Is Captain Felden still commanding?"

Adullam (grimly over vox): "Negative".

Zachariah (over vox): "Another good man lost. Uldek, you lead while I guard the rear. Troopers, watch the alcoves⁶². They may have doors that are perfect..."

(demonic creature assaulting Zachariah)

Zachariah (over vox): "What the... Down!!!"

As Zachariah struggled with the first creature, a second appeared, its wings catching against the rough stonework of the passageway. Uldek and the two others opened fire, but not before it had torn out the throat of one of the troopers.

Uldek: "Drive it away from the Sergeant!"

Zachariah pushed the creature away from him in disgust. Around the corner several meters away he could hear Uldek and the trooper fighting the other abomination that had attacked them. Rounding the bend, Zachariah saw a winged creature lying on top of the second trooper. Next to him Uldek's vox transmitter crackled and sparked. There was no sign of its operator.

Zachariah (over vox): "Uldek. Come in!"

Adullam (over vox): "Serge, whatever you are going to do, do it quickly. We are being cut down here".

Zachariah (gasping, over vox): "Understood".

Checking that no one was present to witness his actions, Zachariah activated his night scope. He examined the alcoves to his right until he came across a tightly sealed door. Running his fingers around its edges he armed a grenade, tossed it at the base and ran for cover.

(explosion shattering the door)

Approaching the hole warily⁶³ Zachariah peered⁶⁴ through it and into the very narrow passage built in the inner wall amongst the citadel's supporting columns. Zachariah stepped inside and was swallowed by the darkness.

Zachariah (over vox): "Adullam, my squad is dead. I am heading straight for the high temple".

In the distance he could make out the very faintest⁶⁵ torchlight and shadows moving across it. Zachariah dropped to the dank⁶⁶ stone floor and readied his sniper rifle. The shadows became the shapes of men and flashes of Lycemicus militia uniform slid across the reticule⁶⁷ of his scope.

(Zachariah unleashing six shots)

Zachariah fired until his sniper rifle was fully discharged. Rising immediately he clambered over the slumped figures and towards rough-hewn⁶⁸ steps rising steeply upwards.

Zachariah (over vox): "Requesting an update from inside the high temple".

A man or what was once a man grappled⁶⁹ with Zachariah in the confined space, clawing and snarling. Struggling for air because of the unnaturally strong grip around his throat Zachariah found the haft of his short sword. Zachariah thrust the blade into the militiaman's chest pushing him back with the force of the blow.

Zachariah: "Idiot, you didn't confirm your kills".

Grabbing his lasrifle and activating the scope he could see the outline of a door.

Zachariah (over vox): "Imperial forces inside the high temple, report your situation".

Reaching the top of the steps Zachariah edged towards the door and grasped the heavy latch⁷⁰, his sword poised⁷¹ for attack.

Zachariah (over vox): "This is Sergeant Zachariah of the 158th Elysian. I am entering the high temple from the eastern inner wall. Do not fire".

(Zachariah opening the door with a squeak)

Stepping into the enormous main chamber of the high temple with his sword at the ready Zachariah regarded the scores of bodies before him. Most were Lycemicus pirate militia, some barely recognizable as such. The rest were Elysian drop troopers.

(Bandrac coughing)

Alerted by the ghastly⁷² sound Zachariah spotted Bandrac slumped in the corner surrounded by the corpses of the enemy and blood pumping from a deep gash⁷³ across his throat.

Bandrac: "Sergeant..."

Zachariah: "Medics are on the way, Colonel. I'll try to stem⁷⁴ the bleeding"

(Bandrac trying to say something)

Zachariah: "Don't speak. It looks like you put quite a fight, sir".

Bandrac reached out to Zachariah, his final words stuck in his ruined throat. Clasping⁷⁵ Bandrac's hand Zachariah knew that despite the man's failings he could not let him die alone. The huge doors to the high temple exploded open. Through the smoke and debris Cadians and Elysians stormed in firing as they charged.

Zachariah: "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

From the milling troops two familiar figures emerged. Zachariah raised his bloody hand in greeting surprised to see that Uldek had not been lost in battle and his old comrade Adullam had also survived.

Adullam: "Sergeant? What happened here?"

Zachariah: "I entered the temple and found Bandrac already too close to death. There was nothing I could do".

Adullam shifted uneasily and Uldek's gaze slid from the unmoving figure of Bandrac to Zachariah's sword dripping with blood.

Zachariah (understanding): "Oh... Oh... Now... Wait a minute..."

* * *

Mastroval: "The high temple... A fitting place for a man to become a martyr".

Zachariah (sighing): "The men who died of Bandrac's mistakes were martyrs, Commissar. He was not".

Mastroval: "No, in your eyes he was deserving of such death".

Zachariah: "Yes, but not by my hand".

Mastroval (smiling): "Oh, you continue to dispute witnesses who described you standing over Bandrac's corpse with a bloodied sword".

Zachariah: "Not at all, I've explained whose blood was on my blade".

Mastroval: "Oh yes, the passageway".

As Mastroval poured over his data slate the veteran could swear the Commissar had a smile on his face.

Mastroval (walking around Sergeant): "You detonated a grenade at the precise spot needed to access a tunnel which led directly to the high temple. Unknowingly... That's extremely convenient, wouldn't you say?"

Zachariah: "It might have been convenient had I been able to save any of the men in that poorly considered attack on high temple, Commissar. They would have been able to stand alongside me and verify my account".

Mastroval: "Oh, despite the overwhelming evidence of your collusion⁷⁶ with the enemy and murder of a superior officer you still protest your innocence".

Zachariah: "I may be guilty of many things, Commissar, but killing my comrades and betraying my people are not two of them".

Mastroval looked up from his data slate sharply, a puzzled look on his face

Mastroval: "Your people?"

(Mastroval approaching Zachariah)

Mastroval: "Have a read of this! Do you remember this data file?"

Zachariah read the glowing words before him. His heart raced.

Mastroval: "I think you finally understand what secrets it contains, don't you?"

Zachariah: "I do".

Mastroval: "Open the file, veteran Sergeant".

(Zachariah opening the file)

Mastroval: "There are over 20,000 names, Sergeant. Twenty thousand".

Zachariah: "I thought... So many..."

Mastroval (emotionally): "And so I pose the question once again, veteran Sergeant Zachariah. Given the evidence how can you defend yourself against the accusations of sabotage within this very training camp and the murder of Bandrac? How do you explain your understanding of the gravity wells on Veyland Sinestre? A safe route to Uldarax and the geography of Samphenor? And deep within the enemy's most heavily fortified citadel you located and navigated your way through a hidden passage to the high temple. How could you do all of these things if you were not in collusion with your Chaos masters from Ophel Minoris and the militia of Lycemicus?"

Zachariah placed the data slate on the table, a single name glowing on the screen.

Mastroval (calmly): "Because of your name, veteran Sergeant... A name you have done your very best to bury, yet still cannot forget".

Zachariah: "Yes".

Mastroval: "A name that has led you to stay far away from Elysia, taking mission after mission in an attempt to distance yourself from those who might discover and condemn you for your true identity".

Zachariah: "Yes".

Mastroval: "What is your name, veteran Sergeant?"

Zachariah rose to his feet and stood to attention, his face a mask of resignation⁷⁷.

Zachariah: "My name is Zachariah of the House Lycemicus".

Mastroval: "At last we have the truth. You probably thought you were the only one from the renegade household fighting on behalf of Elysia. While we don't possess full records on every individual, we are aware of most. You, I believe, fled Veyland Sinestre quite young?"

Zachariah: "13".

Mastroval: "Old enough to have learned many of its secrets, correct? To know the citadel as well as you did, the routes in and out of the high temple, suggests your family must have been quite elevated".

Zachariah: "They were... So... Now you have your confession".

Mastroval: "Of your lineage, yes, but not concerning the matter at hand".

Zachariah: "I've just acquiesced⁷⁸ my kinship with the greatest enemy in Elysia's history and allies to the forces of Chaos. Surely that is enough to authorize my execution order".

Mastroval: "We may have almost limitless numbers of men across the Imperium, but few come as highly trained and lethal as you and your kin. The Emperor can ill-afford to lose 20,000 Elysian drop troops because of an accident of birth, Sergeant".

Zachariah: "Surely it condemns me to death as a liar. That's reason enough for the Commissariat to carry out their duty".

Mastroval: "I think you underestimate the Commissariat and your value to the Emperor. There is no evidence to support the claims that Colonel Bandrac orchestrated a plot against you. Despite your feelings towards him the second attack on Veyland Sinestre was a success".

Zachariah: "A success? Oh. We've lost thousands, the Cadians even more".

Mastroval: "The forces of Chaos were defeated. Bandrac died a hero".

Zachariah: "Yet, you still believe that I acted against my own men? That I am responsible for the deaths on the Cyclops training ground and the final training drop".

Mastroval: "No, I never did".

Zachariah: "If that is the case, then the truth..."

Mastroval: "Will be rewritten. Would you tarnish⁷⁹ the name of Elysia's newest greatest martyr? Make all the deaths because of him seem for not?"

Zachariah: "No, I would not".

Mastroval: "No, in doing so you prove that you are not the same as your reviled⁸⁰ forebears⁸¹. You strive to be the Emperor's truest servant, a worthy son of Elysia. Even if it requires you to put the greater good before your own interests. Which is more than can be said for some of your so-called noble houses. Ah!"

Placing the data slate on the table Mastroval pointed to the newly received information glowing on its screen.

Mastroval: "He tried his very best to make it look as if he was protecting you, but Uldek wasn't quite as skilled in deceit as he thought. No amount of training, political or otherwise, can hide the truth from me".

Zachariah: "Uldek?"

Mastroval: "I am afraid, dear Sergeant, you were maneuvered into the middle of a centuries old blood feud. (smiling) Rather ironic given your own family standing".

Zachariah: "I don't understand".

Mastroval: "House Uldek saw the campaigns against House Lycemicus as a perfect opportunity to further their influence within the Elysian Parliate. Regardless of the danger it posed to the entire planet".

Zachariah (not believing): "That isn't possible. Uldek could have left the Parliate for the call to arms, but he would have been assigned at random".

Mastroval: "To the exact camp he wanted. Uldek's attendants had done the research. They knew all about your history with Bandrac, Sergeant. He chose you, not the other way around. By remaining close to you he knew that Bandrac would be your focus and you his. Yes it was a dangerous ploy⁸² but I'm led to understand the great houses will do anything, sacrifice anyone for dominance".

Zachariah: "Uldek could have died along with me on several occasions. There were... too many things out of his control. The risk was enormous".

Mastroval: "But worth it. Uldek needed to be as close to Bandrac as possible and await his opportunity in the confusion of war".

Zachariah: "It's not much of a plan".

Mastroval: "With Bandrac dead his greatest future political opponent was out of the way. Uldek would use his family influence to demobilize from the 158th and resume the only fight he is truly interested in. The battle for power".

Zachariah: "To use the lives of brave men, good men for his own gain... It disgusts me".

Mastroval: "And so it should".

Zachariah: "How did he get into the high temple?"

Mastroval smiled and pointed back to the data slate.

Mastroval: "And the next screen shows confirmation of a long-range encoded vox transmission made shortly before you were discovered in the high temple. It's a request for all data on the citadel's configuration from the Parliate's archives".

Zachariah: "So he found another way to get in and out, then destroyed his transmitter?"

Mastroval: "If yet to discover the route. However further questioning is under way".

Zachariah: "So he planned to disguise Bandra's murder as another casualty of the battle? It was merely bad luck I was discovered in the high temple".

Mastroval: "For him. Had you not been found over Bandrac's laying body, this investigation would likely never have happened. House Lycemicus would have received the blame".

Zachariah: "You mentioned the truth will be rewritten, Commissar. How so?"

Mastroval: "I shall let it be known that Uldek and his entire House are traitors. He shall be held responsible for the deaths on this training camp, the murder of Bandrac and link his family with House Lycemicus's Chaos alliance. And you shall remain silent. Before the sun sets this day on Elysia, every member of House Uldek will be executed or exiled for crimes against the Emperor. Everyone".

Zachariah: "And what of my fate, Commissar?"

Mastroval: "No charges should be raised against you, veteran Sergeant. You are dismissed".

Zachariah sat for some seconds stunned by the ease with which Mastroval said the words. Getting up from his chair he made for the door only for Mastroval to grab him by the shoulder.

Mastroval: "But know this, veteran Sergeant. Your subterfuge⁸³ will not be without penalty. The Commissariat will keep your secret for now".

Mastroval leaned closer.

Mastroval: "And with your talents you may be asked to pay for our silence".

(Zachariah leaving the interrogation room)