

TALES FROM
THE ARCHIVE



ALTAR OF CYRENE

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A BLOOD RAVENS SHORT STORY

WARHAMMER
40,000

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ALTAR OF CYRENE

Lucien Soulban

Plumes of dust rained across Cyrene, the sky unable to shed tears any longer. A layer of fine debris filled the stratosphere and sent slow-drifting columns of suffocating ash down on the planet's surface. Occasionally, the storm thundered at the touch of orbital mass-driver rounds that rippled the cinder clouds and shattered the ground. The projectiles were fashioned to look like ten tonne metallic statues of the Emperor. Each bomb sent more dust and fire-borne ash into the heavens. Each bomb was an exclamation point in the litany against heresy and another hammer fall in the Exterminatus and destruction absolute of Cyrene's every living citizen. Chaos had a foothold, but the might of the Imperium was busy kicking it loose, and using the final death throes of the planet as an example for all who might falter.

The black fleet of the Adeptus Astartes orbited Cyrene, raining down the will of the Ordo Malleus. No unsanctioned craft could pass through the debris cloud, although escape vessels occasionally breached the canopy of dust, before falling back under the blistering fire of the blockade. Hulls blackened and tongues of flame spat through ruptured seams as the ships careened back to the planet, adding to the confusion. Only the fleet's Thunderhawks and dropships earned free passage, ferrying the wounded and bringing fresh forces into the fray.

And far below the stationary fleet, Cyrene rotated slowly, bringing city after city to bear under the attack.

The thunder was still distant, but the ground shook with the erratic pulse of the fleet's pounding march across the face of the world. Cyrene quivered under the vengeful boot of the Ordo Malleus. If the white haired Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens felt the approaching doom, he ignored it for more pressing concerns. A door shattered under the heel of his thick boot. He could have stepped around the door, through a gaping hole in the house's wall, but Gabriel was in violent humour this early morning. He stepped though, his blood-hued armour and gold winged-skull crest turned a deep sanguine by the surrounding

flames. The two silver service studs on his scalp glistened.

‘Where is he?’ Gabriel roared in frustration.

Librarian Isador Akios did not answer. He moved through the rubble with a grace that belied his bulky librarian’s armour. Arcane banners fluttered lightly from his shoulder guard and his features were as broad as Gabriel’s. But somehow, Isador seemed smaller than the Blood Raven captain, even though the crest-standard of a winged skull rode high above Isador’s helmet. It was as though Gabriel’s unwavering conviction added to his already impressive stature. And Isador wasn’t easily cowed, as Gabriel knew. He was the most powerful librarian in service to the Blood Ravens; he was the most powerful one Gabriel knew. Yet, Gabriel still eclipsed him.

‘If he is not here,’ Isador said, measuring his words carefully, ‘then might I recommend we return to the task at hand?’

Gabriel said nothing. He moved deeper into the house, bearing his shoulder against fallen beams blocking a door. The servos of his exo-gauntlet whined briefly before he shoved aside the heavy debris one-armed, and moved further into the darkness. Gabriel knew what to expect, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes. Nothing. The room was empty.

‘Captain?’ Isador said.

Gabriel remained silent. He wasn’t in the mood to listen.

‘My friend,’ Isador repeated finally. ‘I sense no thoughts here. He’s fled.’

‘No!’ Gabriel spun around, slamming his fist into a wall, anchoring it wrist-deep in concrete. ‘Esmond hasn’t fled.’ Gabriel pulled his hand from the wall and pushed past Isador. ‘Mark my words.’

‘I hope he’s worthy of such praise,’ Isador said after Gabriel, following him outside. They stood among the ruins of buildings that bled a choking smoke into the night air. All around them, the sounds of bolt and plasma fire cut screams to the quick while deeper, within the heart of the city of Bastilius itself, explosions rattled the senses and sent debris raining down in the surrounding blocks. The captain heard little of it, however. This pandemonium was familiar to him, this war-song his serenade to the Emperor.

‘Gabriel,’ Isador said. ‘Look around you. We are here to bear witness to this. We are the last who will see this world alive. We should return to the Grey Knights before this quest of yours endangers the Blood Ravens.’

Gabriel spun on his heel and walked up to Isador, staring him straight in his black eyes, piercing him with a nail-hammered gaze. ‘Are you saying the Blood Ravens do not stand with me in this?’

‘We do stand with you,’ Isador said. ‘Through whatever hell you charge into, you’ll find us at your side.’

‘But?’

‘But let the cause be just. We will follow you, but don’t abuse our trust in you. What is one man’s life in all this?’ Isador said, spreading his arms to encompass the destruction around them. ‘What is one man’s fate compared to the will of the Emperor?’

‘Nothing,’ Gabriel admitted through gritted teeth.

Isador nodded. ‘Nothing.’

There were only ruins around them, Gabriel realised, blackened carapaces of hollowed buildings, the cries for help, the streaks of light that brought death in their wake. ‘We’ll return to the land speeder,’ Gabriel said. ‘Scout the area on behalf of our Grey Knight brethren. But on my word... on my word, I will do what I must if I see him.’

‘I—’ Isador said, but Gabriel silenced him with a cautioning finger and stared at him until the librarian finally nodded. ‘Very well,’ he said with a sigh. ‘I’ll help. If only to save you from yourself.’

Gabriel smiled. ‘I knew you were good for something, brother.’ He headed back to the land speeder which hovered a few inches from the ground in the empty street.

‘Captain,’ Isador said.

Gabriel turned to find Isador staring out into the ash-choked distance, where flashes danced through the haze and earth-rending shudders shook the ground.

‘Over there,’ the librarian whispered. A flash of coruscating energy flashing across the open plates of his helm. ‘Psykers do battle.’

Gabriel recognised Isador’s tone, it was his war voice that delighted in the anticipation of battle. Touching his ear module, Gabriel brought the silenced comm-net chatter back into focus.

‘...retinue. Inquisitor Lord Ca... fallen... encount... heavy psyker resis... Gregoriask Dist...,’ a voice cried before a wail of static erupted over Gabriel’s earpiece.

Both men jumped into the speeder’s seats, nimble despite their heavy armour. Isador gunned the throttle and sent the craft gliding through the debris-clogged streets.

‘All Blood Raven squads in the vicinity of Gregoriask,’ Gabriel said. ‘Converge on my signal.’

They headed toward the thick curtain of smoke.

The surrounding buildings were phantoms in the swirling dust, the battle hidden in quick bursts of lightning and fractured screams. Isador steered the land speeder, reacting to obstacles before they appeared from the ashen mists mere

metres away. Obstacles raced by Gabriel, but he was focused on what lay ahead of them. He half-stood in his chair, bracing one foot against the seat, ready to pounce from his perch.

They shot past a ruined Rhino with its jagged metal petals blossomed open. Flashes ahead caught Gabriel's attention. The craft decelerated and Gabriel leaped from his seat, momentum carrying him forward through the fog. He landed in a run and jumped again, clearing several metres more with his quick stride.

Ahead, in the fog, a cowled psyker appeared. Dark sigils covered his clothing and from him emanated the stench of darkness. Metal tubes snaked from the back of his skull, he bore a shark's smile and twin embers of hellish light for eyes. Energy coursed around him and he fired once into the darkness, trying to hit Isador. By the time he noticed Gabriel's charge, it was too late. The captain pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol into the psyker's temple and fired, rocking him off his feet and slamming him into the ground.

Gabriel never slowed his pace.

Running, he scanned the darkness for more targets. About him, screams and weapons discharges tore through the night, as did the whine of Isador's land speeder and the *whump-whump* of its mounted heavy bolter. Another shape appeared from the mists, this one bulky and laden with prosthetics. It swung around at Gabriel's approach. Gabriel could see that its arms had been replaced with melta cannons and a chain blade, its upper body crawling with preservation tubes and armour plates. One eye was gone, replaced by a large implant. It was an inquisitor's gun servitor, tracking movement with a servo-skull. The servitor nodded to Gabriel before opening fire into the darkness, screaming its holy fury at some invisible enemy.

Gabriel swung wide and to the outside, following the servitor's superheated thermal discharges, but keeping his distance lest the blast's halo cook him instead. Something returned fire back at the servitor, the mist displaced by the scorching pressure wave of a raw psyblast. It tore up and blistered the ground in its passage, striking the gun servitor in its chest. It screamed, white-hot pyrokinetic flames engulfing it. Gabriel ran faster, knowing what would come next. The fire ignited the pyrum-petrol gases that still lingered in the servitor's fuel lines, back into his subdermal reservoirs. The explosion spread the servitor's body across two dozen red metres.

The shockwave threw Gabriel through the air. He landed, fell and was back on his feet again, his eyes scanning the turbulent mists for his opponent, as if nothing had happened.

The psyker betrayed his position, cackling at the servitor's expense. Gabriel

gripped his teeth and honed in on the psyker's voice. He charged into the darkness, surprise his best weapon. The mists parted, revealing a mutant, his neck twisted one-hundred-and eighty degrees and his bearded face stretched long. His four eyes blinked, offset from one another, and he stared straight at Gabriel with a malicious grin. Surprise did not belong to the captain.

Before Gabriel could raise his bolter, the psyker unleashed another scorching psyblast. Gabriel dodged to the side, avoiding the flare that ripped past him, but not the blast's superheated corona. Even through his armour, it blistered the skin on his neck and scalp. He fired at the psyker from the ground, punching large holes in his opponent's chest and skull; it fell to the ground.

Gabriel raised himself to one knee as a third psyker entered his field of vision, electricity crackling about his body. Even the robes on this one couldn't conceal the misshapen bulk hiding beneath. With subtle grace, Gabriel touched his earpiece.

'Die,' the creature hissed, raising his arm.

'Only when the Emperor so instructs,' Gabriel responded.

Before the psyker could react, Isador's land speeder burst forth from the mists. Isador caught the mutant in the face with the vehicle's front grill, decapitating him. Gabriel's earpiece erupted with new comm-net chatter and a squad of Grey Knights loomed out of the smoke. Their armour was of burnished silver and engraved runes glowed a subdued gold. They were impressive and would have brought any man to his knees in reverence, but Gabriel was not so easily cowed by these glorious servants. He stood and nodded. He would meet them as equals.

The Grey Knight apothecary sprayed the burns on Gabriel's neck. The wounds calcified into dead, hardened skin while the apothecary offered the Litany of Healing and peeled off the flakes. Gabriel didn't grimace at the large patches of skin being torn away. His thoughts rested elsewhere.

'We sensed rogue psykers in the area and were on our way to cleanse them with fire. It seems you beat us to it,' the apothecary said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel saw Sergeant Caine of the Blood Ravens standing by Isador's side. They waited for the apothecary to finish his healing rituals.

'Are we done, good brother?' Gabriel asked the Grey Knight.

'Almost,' he responded before jabbing the hypo-spike into Gabriel's neck. A burning liquid rushed into Gabriel's jugular, scouring infections from his system.

Gabriel rubbed his neck and walked over to Caine and Isador. They waited for the apothecary to walk out of earshot.

'We stayed off the comm-net channels as you requested,' Caine said to

Gabriel.

‘Did you find him?’ Gabriel asked.

‘We did, brother-captain. Brother Uray and his squad sequestered Esmond in the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith.’

‘We must hurry,’ Isador said. ‘The Grey Knights are moving through the area, eliminating all in their path. If they catch Brother Uray harbouring a fugitive... well.’

‘Very well,’ Gabriel replied. ‘Thank you for your help, Brother Caine. Return to your sweep sector and avoid arousing the Inquisition’s suspicions. Comply with their every demand. If they ask for me, do not lie for my benefit. I will not see anyone else dragged into this.’

With a curt nod, Caine walked away, rejoining his squad.

‘We should hurry,’ Isador said.

Gabriel studied Isador for a moment, one eyebrow raised. ‘I’m surprised,’ he said. ‘I thought you believed my actions misguided. Why encourage me to see Esmond?’

‘Because if you don’t,’ Isador said, ‘then you’ll always wonder. And if you wonder, then you’ll be distracted, and distraction leads to dangerous places.’

‘You hope doing this will clear my thoughts.’

‘I wish you clarity, Gabriel. I know you. You are strongest when you remain a focused instrument of the Emperor’s will. Your heart should have space for none other.’

‘Very well,’ Gabriel said, then paused. ‘I could order you to stay behind.’

‘You could,’ Isador said, getting into the land speeder. He sat down in the driver’s seat, looking straight ahead. ‘But why force me to disobey an order?’

A crooked smile tugged at the corner of Gabriel’s lips. He sat in the passenger’s seat and watched the ground fall away as they rose skyward.

A clean wind from the Canarrin Mountains swept over Bastillius, dragging away much of the ash fog, but doing nothing to improve the vista. The city burned and the fires spread with a rapacious hunger, forcing the land speeder to duck beneath the black canopy of smoke. The craft skimmed over cratered buildings and ruined hulks, buffeted from sudden drafts and hot columns.

From his vantage point, Gabriel studied the streets below, the apocalypse of a world unfolding in hellish detail. Squads of Inquisitorial storm troopers, wearing red cloth and gun grey armour, moved through the streets. They directed their meltaguns against the adjoining building, through windows and holes, herding the hidden occupants out into the streets, where others waited to cut them down in a blistering hail of fire. Those who didn’t escape the buildings died in the

inferno.

Further on, Grey Knight Terminators served as artillery units, firing gas grenades into fleeing crowds. Those caught in the noxious fumes screamed short-lived cries, before the acid clouds seared out their lungs. They fell to the ground convulsing, their skin sloughing off as the gas ate at the connective tissue anchoring flesh and muscle to bones. They died after several minutes of agony, skin draped loose over their own skeletons.

Gabriel slammed his hand against the land speeder's door, his blow rocking the vehicle and leaving behind an appreciable dent. Isador didn't react, but Gabriel knew that his eyes darted in his direction.

'They earned this fate, Gabriel,' Isador said.

'I know,' Gabriel responded through clenched teeth. 'But this is my...' He trailed off. Isador already knew what this place meant to Gabriel.

'I know these streets. I once lived here,' Gabriel said.

Isador said nothing at first, and Gabriel knew he didn't appreciate the weight of that statement. The librarian was raised in a monastery, training to control his power, to resist the whispers of the warp. He had no home. Nothing to watch die.

'Cyrene was your home centuries ago, my friend,' Isador said. 'Nearly everyone you know is dead and gone.'

'But not their children, or the names I remember.'

'Do you doubt the wisdom of this?' Isador said, his brows furrowed.

'No!' Gabriel replied, angry that Isador would suspect him of the most hateful of all sins: the sin of doubt. 'This action is just! Even if I was asked to end the life of every man, woman and child here, one bullet at a time, then I would do so. The planet was steeped in heresy, the taint of the warp in her very soil!'

'Then why are you angry?' Isador asked.

'Because they fell to heresy. My people, Isador, my entire world! It is corrupt enough to sanction the destruction of every last soul. They failed the Emperor, and for what? Tell me. They sacrificed their very salvation for what?'

'I don't know, my friend. And for that, I am glad.'

'And look at the Inquisition down there. Look at them, cackling at their duty. This is not sport. This is a just and holy cause, yet...' Gabriel said, trailing off, suddenly realising he felt spent.

'Yet what?' Isador asked.

Gabriel looked at the librarian and saw no suspicious glances, no sense of disgust, just concern for a friend.

'And yet,' Gabriel said, 'the Inquisition acts like a plague of locusts.'

'That is their role in this. Their duty. It is up to them to be the terrible plague, ridding the planet of this taint.'

‘I do not question their place in the Emperor’s plan,’ Gabriel said. ‘Neither do I question the importance of all this. Let this diseased world be amputated, lest the scourge of heresy infect more worlds. I just wonder if there are none here who deserve a quick, quiet death. Not everyone here is corrupt. Surely not all deserve their burning fate, nor the renouncement of their names? Not all were so weak as to fall. I wish we could leave them their dignity in their final hours.’

‘Who are we to take that chance?’ Isador asked. ‘I would prefer a million innocent victims to die than to suffer one false martyr to the dark to escaped our notice. A hollow saint undermines, no, mocks, the sanctity of our faith. And remember, nobody here is innocent. The Inquisition deemed it so. The heresy was too widespread, too pervasive, for anyone to miss its presence. If they knew of the sacrilege, then they are guilty of doing nothing. And if they didn’t notice so obvious a plague, then they must pay for their blindness. There is no innocence here, Gabriel. There is only heresy, and the duty to eradicate it.’ Isador paused, obviously considering his next words. ‘What is it St. Galantain said?’

Gabriel closed his eyes, bringing the verse to memory. ‘Let each sacrifice be a lesson unto others. I sacrifice my eyes so that others might see. I sacrifice my tongue so you are not swayed by sweet words.’ He opened his eyes in time to see Isador nod appreciatively. ‘You’re saying Cyrene shouldn’t be viewed in context to its own misery?’ Gabriel asked.

‘This lesson is not meant for Cyrene. It is a lesson for others, that ignorance is not the same as innocence. Now, citizens of the Imperium will be more vigilant against the followers of the ruinous powers lest their own worlds suffer this fate.’

Gabriel looked down again and saw all the servo-skulls floating around, taking account of events and recording everything for the sake of posterity. Strange how he never noticed them before. ‘Such spectacle,’ he said to himself.

‘But necessary. Otherwise why would we to all this trouble?’

That’s when Gabriel saw something on the ground flash, then the corkscrewing smoke trail.

‘Missile!’ Gabriel shouted, but it was too late.

The missile swallowed the land speeder’s starboard stabiliser wing in a bloom of fire, sending the craft screaming earthward. Gabriel muttered the Litany of Safe Landing and gripped the door’s frame, while Isador fought for control of the vessel; he managed to pull up from the dive at the last moment, sending the land speeder skidding down a decimated street, tearing up plascrete.

The land speeder came to a stop, both wings shredded and sparking wires hanging from rent seams. Gabriel and Isador stumbled out from the vehicle,

rattled but unharmed. Isador muttered a thanks to the land speeder's machine spirit for delivering them safely. Gabriel scanned the burned-out hulks of the local buildings for signs of their attackers.

They didn't wait long.

A small cluster of people emerged from the ruins, perhaps ten or fifteen, their expressions hard and their eyes like knives. Some were from Cyrene's Imperial Guard regiments; others carried weapons scavenged from fallen inquisitors and storm troopers. None bore the taint of Chaos.

Isador stepped forward, ready to engage the rabble, but Gabriel cleared his throat, stopping him. The librarian looked at him, his eyes betraying his confusion.

Then he understood.

More people were hiding in the buildings, armed with the Emperor knew what. Isador relaxed, though Gabriel knew he was ready to lash out with the formidable psyker abilities at his disposal.

Gabriel studied the people who advanced slowly, cautiously, their plundered weapons at the ready. The captain could see that some didn't even understand the nature of their firearms. None knew how to appease the spirit of the machine or offer Litanies for the Pulling of the Trigger or Arming of the Magazine. They were angry, and they were frightened, and they wanted blood.

Gabriel decided to goad more out from the shadows, to reveal their true numbers.

'If you are trying to frighten us with this pitiful flock, I suggest you return when you have more people,' Gabriel said and turned around to walk away. Around them, more citizens stepped out from the shadows of buildings blocking their path, holding pipes and makeshift weapons. The dozen turned into a mob of two hundred, with Isador and Gabriel surrounded.

'I offer you a quick, painless death, which is more than you deserve,' Gabriel said.

'Deserve?' a woman said, her voice an eagle's screech, her plump body covered with tiny wounds and dust. 'We didn't deserve this.'

'Then what did you deserve?' Isador asked. 'Praise for allowing heresy to fester beneath your very noses?'

'We are not heretics!' an old guardsman cried, waving an arm which had been amputated at the elbow. 'I lost my limb for the Emperor.'

'And yet you desecrate that honour now,' Gabriel said. 'How sad that you couldn't serve your Emperor here, when it truly mattered. Better we rid Him of such hollow devotion.'

The old man spat in disgust and raised his lasgun to fire. Gabriel was quicker

and fired first. The guardsman's head exploded, spraying those around him. The crowd shrieked, some falling back, others rushing forward to tear at Gabriel and Isador with their bare hands and clubs.

Isador was the first to act, his armour crackling with electricity, his movements blindingly quick as he swung his cable-mounted axe, dismembering people in the crowd two or three at a time.

Gabriel did nothing to hide his rage. His temper unravelled, slipping with each burst of violence against his own people. Anger surging forth, Gabriel's field of vision tightened until the world narrowed into dagger-points. He raged against the mass of bodies throwing themselves at him, trying to tear him apart.

'How could you do this?' Gabriel said, crushing three people with the sweep of his gauntlet. 'How could you allow this to happen? You gave heresy a home in your own shadows. Whether by ignorance or indolence, you did this to yourselves!'

The crowd shrieked in anger and more people threw themselves upon the two Space Marines. Gabriel could no longer see Isador.

'How dare you do this to my home,' Gabriel screamed, his voice deafening, his bolter dropping attackers two and three at a shot. 'Everything I knew,' Gabriel continued as he threw one man into several others. 'St. Garryin's Monument, the Bachsellan Festivals, the Spring-Borne Lakes, the Winter Lights of the South, all gone because of you!'

'How could you do this to us?' someone cried out. 'How could you destroy your own people?'

'Damn you!' Gabriel roared. 'Damn you for drawing this upon yourselves and damn you for making me your executioner. Who do you think discovered your shame? Who do you think it was who brought the Inquisition here?'

'You betrayed us,' someone said, before Gabriel crushed him underfoot.

'I did not betray you,' Gabriel screamed, his indignation uncontained. 'I merely lifted the rock and found you squirming beneath. You betrayed yourselves.'

More bodies fell upon Gabriel, but none could dam his fury. He raged against all those who touched him, cutting lives with the brutal mercy of bolts, fists and boots.

The two Marines walked in silence, deeper into the heart of Bastillius where buildings lay in piles of burning rubble and the ravens sang serenades to the corpses. Gabriel's march was silent, his thoughts as dark as the night around him. Isador remained quiet. Gabriel could see he was invigorated after the massacre, a chance to destroy heresy was a powerful affirmation of his own faith

in the Emperor. But the librarian was also wise enough not to say anything. This was not a victory for Gabriel. It was his troubled duty, and Isador had known Gabriel long enough to recognise the distinction.

Both men continued their march across the city, with Gabriel determined to reach the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith. Both were caked in the filth of death, their every victim having left something of themselves behind on their armour.

And they walked because Gabriel refused to contact anyone via the vox, he refused to draw any more of his men into his personal quest, or to reveal his position.

Gabriel and Isador stood upon the rise of the hill that was once crowned with monolithic buildings. All that remained were the streets and the flattened terrain. Massive earth movers had shoved the rubble into the crude fortifications that now surrounded the Crucivex Camp at the foot of the hill. Gabriel and Isador stared down, their minds unprepared for what lay below them.

The Crucivex Camp stretched into the darkness for miles. Tens of thousands of Cyrene's citizens had been crucified on crosses, their lifeless – or near lifeless – bodies dangling from cross bars, their death one of slow suffocation. None could cry out, so the flocks of ravens did it for them. In the chaotic maze of hanging bodies, servo-skulls wove lazy paths, recording everything as a warning to others who would truck with heresy.

Gabriel and Isador said nothing. Their surprise was naught but a brief pause, long enough to register the fact that they'd never witnessed this particular horror. But now they had. Now it was time to go on.

Their path took the duo through the ruins of this place, past breaks in the high walls of rubble, past the bare, impaled feet of the crucified and through the forest of crosses. For the hour they walked, the occasional victim stirred, but most noise came from the buzzing corpse-flies, laying their eggs in the dead, and the ravens who feasted upon this unexpected banquet.

The sound of a lasgun stopped the pair. Gabriel and Isador waited, their breaths held to hear more reports. A moment later, there was another shot, the discharge muted.

They moved toward the sound, careful of their surroundings. A third shot finally brought them within sight on a black-haired Imperial Guardsman. He was young and without the blemish of a scar or cybernetic augment, a neophyte to Cyrene's defence force and now among the doomed. He looked broken, his clothing ripped and covered in dust, his arm bandaged for some wound that drew flies to it, and a lasgun hanging limply at his side. He walked among the crosses, searching for anyone who was still alive, defying the Inquisition who had left

this dead place for better killing fields. When he found someone, their breaths shallow and their wounds still bleeding, he fired a shot into their forehead. He didn't notice either Space Marine as he walked away from them.

Isador's eyes narrowed, he stepped forward, intent on stopping him. Gabriel placed his hand on the librarian's shoulder.

'He has no right to end their suffering,' Isador replied, but Gabriel shook his head. He drew his bolt pistol. There were two rounds left. The fight with the mob had drained his ammunition.

Gabriel ejected one round into the palm of his gauntlet – he would have need of that later – and pointed the pistol at the soldier.

He fired.

The shot nicked his bicep; he screamed in surprise and ran, vanishing into the darkness. Isador stared at Gabriel, not daring to ask the question. The captain offered nothing and continued walking. He left the question hanging in the air, but Isador knew as well as anyone else.

Gabriel rarely missed.

Dawn approached, yet the sky remained dark and overcast with clouds of soot and ash. The city was quiet in these early hours, the harrying Inquisition marching westward in gigantic convoys and leaving the city to its appointed hour with the fleet's orbital mass drivers. Less than a half-hour remained.

Gabriel and Isador reached St. Bellstus's Shrine: an old bunker now exposed to the heavens. Its exterior was monolithic, a squat rectangular building that once rested far beneath the earth. During an ork invasion that had swept through the system decades before, the bunker was the site of a great massacre after the orks had breached its defences, slaughtering the thousands inside. When the Imperium reclaimed the world they dug up the bunker and turned it into a shrine.

Outside the single, open-mouthed entrance, the blond-haired Brother Uray waited with another Blood Raven, Akios, by their land speeder. They both looked apprehensive. Uray quickly donned his helmet at Gabriel's approach and ran up to him.

'Do you have Esmond?' Gabriel asked.

'We do. We caught him trying to flee the city.'

Gabriel gritted his teeth, but otherwise did not react to the news. Akios looked away: Gabriel knew he enjoyed being right about most things, only he didn't want to be right about this. He didn't want to be right at Gabriel's expense, and that bothered Gabriel even more.

'Captain,' Uray said. 'The Inquisition have ordered our evacuation to the city of Sestra. The orbital bombardment begins soon. I ordered my squad to leave,

but—’

‘You did well,’ Gabriel said, his gaze fixed upon the bunker’s entrance. ‘Give me ten minutes, then send a Thunderhawk for us.’

‘As you wish, captain, but hurry. He’s in the rear shrine. We barricaded the door. May the Emperor watch over you.’ Uray ran for the land speeder. The other Blood Raven was already invoking the machine’s spirit, readying it for flight. They sped off quickly.

‘This is as far as you go,’ Gabriel told Isador.

‘Very well, old friend,’ Isador said. ‘But you know whose will you must serve in this.’

‘There is one God, and He is my Emperor, Isador. I am His instrument in all things.’

‘I do not doubt your faith, Gabriel,’ Isador said. ‘In fact, I marvel at your conviction, and I envy you the well you draw your strength from. Just remember that your actions are just, even if you may question them.’

‘I know my actions are just, old friend,’ Gabriel said, walking toward the door. ‘And, as in all things, truth needs pain to make it real.’

There would be no one left to honour the dead here Gabriel realised as he walked the hallways. The bunker-shrine served as a sepulchre that interred the skulls of all those massacred in St. Bellstus during the ork invasion. The skulls now sat inside grate-covered niches along the walls, each one painted red and blue with prayers and decorated with wax imprints and rune-covered banners. In a few hours, they’d be buried under rubble, with nobody to remember their names or celebrate their lives. In a few hours, the spirits of the thousands who died here would be joined by millions more. Their voices would be lost in the chorus of heretics.

Gabriel reached the rear shrine and found the double doors chained. It was easy enough to kick it open with his heavy boot, scattering splinters across the floor. Inside the candlelit shrine were the skulls of the unnamed dead, stacked in columns, an altar for prayer and four rows of pews. Praying at the altar was an old man. His eyes were milky, his bald head covered with liver spots, his face caked in stubble and filth and his body covered in a network of tubes and filters that wheezed as they pumped rejuvenation fluids into his organs. The old man recognised Gabriel and straightened, an act of defiance that seemed to belie his long years.

‘You’re here to kill me?’ Esmond said, his voice raspy.

‘That I do not know, father. That I do not know,’ Gabriel responded.

‘Attention, Bastillius cleanser units. This is a final call for evacuation of all Inquisition, Grey Knight, Storm trooper and Blood Raven squads. Regroup at staging area ten miles east of Sestra. Expect heavy resistance from active XIV Cyrene Guard Legion. Orbital bombardment commences in ten min—’

Gabriel tapped his ear piece, lowering the barrage of noise from the vox. He studied his father who matched his gaze with equal venom, his eyes glittering in the candlelight.

‘Where were you trying to escape to?’ Gabriel asked calmly. ‘You should know there is no place left to flee.’

‘I will not die cowering like an animal,’ he spat.

‘No, instead you forced me to chase you down like one.’

‘You will excuse me if I don’t apologise.’

‘It wouldn’t matter,’ Gabriel said, waving his hand. ‘I wouldn’t accept your apology. Forgiveness is a means of earning a second knife in your back.’

‘Yes. Imagine, then, my surprise when the knife I found in my back belonged to my own son.’

‘I swore to protect the Imperium against all manner of threat.’

‘I am not a heretic,’ Esmond said with a mechanical hiss in his voice.

‘But you are a coward.’

‘Better I the coward, than you the butcher!’ Esmond’s outburst sent him into a coughing fit. He spat up black liquid. No doubt one of his rejuvenation pumps was leaking.

‘It means nothing to me. Butcher. Murderer. Assassin. I have been called them all today, yesterday, in the weeks before. And I will hear them in the weeks to come.’

‘You... must be very... proud,’ Esmond said between gasps.

‘Proud? I am, that I can serve the Emperor against all adversaries. But that my adversaries include members of my own world, my own family. That is hard to take.’

‘Gabriel, you’ve betrayed us. For the sake of eliminating a handful of heretics, you condemned our entire planet. Your home, your own blood!’

‘It isn’t for a handful, father. Do you think me so ruthless? The corruption is complete, and complete enough to blind you all.’

‘We weren’t blind,’ Esmond said. ‘And it wasn’t heresy. We were tired of living under the Emperor’s rule. It was a rebellion of ideals, not religion.’

‘So you knew?’ Gabriel asked, his worst fear realised.

‘I knew. And I embraced it. Our ideals were just.’

‘There is no ideal but the Emperor’s!’

‘Spare me the hollow mantras. I taught you to think for yourself.’

‘And I do. With a terrible clarity, but I do.’

‘I hope you realise that your so-called ideals were a doorway for Chaos to slip through. Good men and women are fighting the heretics infesting the sewers of Undergauth. All the psykers from the local Pathfinder Gymnasium were turned, as were high-ranking officers within the Imperial Guard.’

‘They’d have you believing anything, now. They lied to you.’

‘No, it was you who were lied to. The minions of Chaos led you astray and you walked in their company, blissfully ignorant. Heresy is heresy, and it was widespread. Even now, the Inquisition is questioning all Cyrene guardsman off world, and I doubt any will survive the torture, or escape from this unscathed!’

‘Except you,’ Esmond said.

‘What?’

‘You will escape this unscathed.’ Esmond said, regaining his strength for what Gabriel knew to be his next venomous attack. ‘You requested this destruction, and thus, are above blame or fault in this. The last innocent son of Cyrene, only...’

‘Only what?’ Gabriel said, trying to keep his temper contained.

‘Only, you did not see the corruption either, until it was too late. Are you not, therefore, guilty of being blind yourself? Are you not guilty of our so-called sin?’

‘What is this? Some feeble attempt to riddle my mind with doubt? Guilt? Now you are speaking like a heretic.’

‘Oh, that would be an easier pill to swallow, wouldn’t it? Far easier for you to kill the heretic than your own innocent father. Well then, kill me. Do what you came to do. But have the courage to look me in my eyes and acknowledge my innocence.’

Gabriel studied his father a moment, searching for some deception. He saw none, but felt a low rumble move beneath his feet. It wouldn’t stop. The bombardment had begun further east, and was getting closer.

‘I will do no such thing,’ Gabriel replied.

‘Then who’s the coward now? You wish to kill me? Use your bolter, put me in your sights, and say: “Father, you are an innocent man in all this.” Then pull the trigger.’

‘No,’ Gabriel said without a shred of emotion. ‘I came here so you could take your own life, not to execute you.’ Gabriel put his bolt pistol on the altar.

‘Reclaim your pride. Do what is right and let me remember you the hero, not the coward. It has one bolt left, for you.’

Gabriel watched his father, while around them both, dust drifted down from the ceiling, shaken loose from the earth-torn tremors growing in magnitude.

Esmond looked at the bolt pistol and picked it up, its size and weight ungainly in his feeble grip.

Esmond shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said, and put down the gun. 'The man I raised wouldn't leave a bolt in a weapon, so he could be killed by it. And if you were so stupid, I still wouldn't turn the bolter on myself. Better my blood on your hands, so you might never wash it off.'

Gabriel took the bolter from the altar and removed the clip.

'Hiding behind the coming bombardment?' Esmond said. 'Asking me to kill myself, to spare you that pain? Who's the coward now?'

'You are right that I am not such a fool as to stay defenceless.' Gabriel removed the round hidden in his belt pouch and shoved it into the clip with a small prayer. 'But I am not a coward. I will kill you.' He pointed the bolter at Esmond. 'But I had hoped that you would prove yourself the brave man I remembered.'

'And I hope you are orphaned from everything and everyone you hold dear,' Esmond said. 'I curse the day your mother spat you out from between her legs.'

'At least she had the courage to turn the bolter on herself,' Gabriel said before he pulled the trigger.

The blues and whites of Cyrene were gone, swallowed by a choking death. All that remained was a ceiling of black clouds and the occasional hellish glow of magma-fuelled fires from where the orbital bombardment had shattered the crust.

Cyrene was dead. Yet, that did not stop the orbiting fleet from broad-siding the planet with their cannons.

If Gabriel noticed his burning world through the starboard chancel's bay windows, however, he showed no emotion. Instead, he remained kneeling before the impassive Grand Master Qanox, a Grey Knight Space Marine who dwarfed the captain in stature. Qanox was impressive in his silver armour and the long strips of parchment intertwined around both arms. In his hands, he held a special writ, while at his side, a robed hierophant with tubes snaking in and out of her robes, read aloud:

'...and let all know that by decree of the sovereign might of the Golden Throne of Terra, that Captain Gabriel Angelos acted with righteous diligence in requesting the destruction of Cyrene, and that he is found innocent of the heresy tainting the planet.'

Gabriel accepted the writ.

'You did well, last son of Cyrene,' Qanox said. 'Stand and rejoin your brethren, as an equal.'

The room exploded into cheers as the Blood Ravens surrounded the captain, forcing him to his feet. Qanox nodded once and left the room with the hierophant in tow, leaving the Blood Ravens to their moment.

Gabriel remained grim-faced throughout, even after they toasted him for his innocence and drifted off into smaller groups, talking of their recent exploits on the now-dead world. Only Isador remained by the captain's side.

'Careful,' Isador said quietly and nodded to the writ.

Gabriel suddenly realised he was gripping it so hard that he was creasing the parchment. He loosened his grip, but not his expression.

'I thought you should know,' Isador said. 'We leave orbit tomorrow, the machine spirits willing.'

'I thought we were to remain here for the week,' Gabriel said, momentarily forgetting his sorrow.

'The fleet will remain, but we are to escort the Hellwatch Battlegroup. An ork fleet has entered the Tartarus system and the Imperium is dispatching us to handle the invasion.'

'Tartarus? Why is that name familiar?' Gabriel asked.

'It is a pilgrim world, with a very important saint. She lies near the Eye of Terror and has endured several Black Crusades.'

Gabriel smiled. 'I know it now. Good libraries?'

'Supposedly,' Isador said with a grin. 'There are some tomes that our Chapter's library needs desperately.'

'Good. You can visit them when we are done with the orks. After these two weeks,' Gabriel said, staring out at Cyrene, 'a little war will be a welcome relief.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LUCIEN SOULBAN wrote the novels *Desert Raiders* and *Necromunda: Fleshworks*, as well as the scripts for the Warhammer 40,000 computer games *Dawn of War* and *Dawn of War: Winter Assault*. He is a prolific writer of roleplaying games and has worked extensively in the video games industry. After experimenting with life in the United States and his native Saudi Arabia, he settled in Montreal, Canada. He would like to stress that Lucien Soulban really is his name.



When an Imperial listening station receives an enigmatic call for help from a far-flung planet, a regiment of Tallarn Desert Raiders is sent to investigate.

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