

WARHAMMER
40,000
DAWN OF WAR

The Trials of Isador



C S GOTO

A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY
THE TRIALS
OF ISADOR

C.S. Goto

The binding of the book glistened slightly as Gabriel looked at it, shifting and shimmering in the dim light of the little librarium that the captain kept reserved for his personal use. There was an intricate design inscribed into the unusual material of the cover; it seemed to flicker in and out of resolution, as though its level of precision lay just beyond the capacities of even Gabriel's enhanced eyes. The book enticed and repulsed simultaneously.

"Where did you find this, Prathios?" he asked, without averting his eyes from the elaborate, silvered image of raven-wings before him.

"He left it in my care, captain," replied the Chaplain. His voice was deep and edged with concern, like the warm light ebbing out of the orb that hung above the desk. For a moment, Prathios wanted to reach out of the shadows and place a reassuring hand on Gabriel's shoulder. The captain looked strained and gaunt, sitting before the heavy tome in the lonely space, he wore the worries of a captain whose battle-brother and friend had fallen beyond his sight right before his eyes.

"He gave it to you?" asked Gabriel. He turned his head slightly, as though to indicate a measure of incredulity, but not far enough for Prathios to see his face.

The Chaplain measured his words. "He entrusted it to me."

There was a long silence before Gabriel turned his head back to the book, considering its remarkable cover with a deep sadness in his heart. "And you entrust it to me, Prathios? What would you have me do with it?"

"You are our captain, Gabriel, and Commander of the Watch. It is for you to decide." The Chaplain's words were laced with an unspoken meaning that Gabriel was reluctant to acknowledge.

"He was my friend, Prathios..." began Gabriel, letting his words trail into a thoughtful silence. "We fought in the Blood Trials of Cyrene together, all those years ago. You must remember that? We stood shoulder to shoulder at the end of that ordeal, as we did after innumerable battles thereafter, each holding the fate of the other in our hands. We were united in trust from the very beginning, Prathios. I do not want this now."

Prathios looked down at the back of his captain's closely cropped and scarred head. Not for the first time, he found himself thinking that Gabriel looked old before his time, as though the crippling responsibilities of his position and his past had defeated even the renowned longevity of the Blood Ravens.

The Chaplain remembered those fateful Blood Trials well—he had been there too. He had been the one who had overseen the intense competition and the

bloodshed. He had watched Gabriel and Isador emerge victorious and gore-soaked from the fray, one after the other. He had seen the way that they had drawn instinctively together, never once turning their fearsome passions on each other, despite the clear rules of the trials; for the sake of mutual respect and trust, they had risked mutual failure. And that was one of the reasons that they had passed: unbreakable resolve and inherent brotherhood was just as important as combat proficiency.

The Blood Ravens could fashion a Space Marine out of any healthy body, as long as it was a genetic match with the Chapter's gene-seed, but that body would be of no use to anyone if its will was weak or fractured. Worse: a weakness of will could be the seed of treachery, and too many Marines had already fallen into the cursed abyss of heresy.

It was their instantaneous and profound brotherhood that made Isador's fall so painful and personal for Gabriel, but ultimately it had been Prathios who had approved of their ascension into the ranks of the Blood Ravens neophytes. It had been Prathios who had overlooked the infringement of the rules of the trials, which had explicitly stated that each warrior was finally responsible only for himself. He could have set the survivors against one another, forcing them to fight through to the last man standing, but he had seen the resolve in those fiery blue-green eyes and he had known that there was no way that Gabriel would turn on his impromptu brother-in-arms.

It had been Prathios who had placed his own sense of wisdom before the traditions of the Blood Ravens and, to some extent, it had been on his recommendation that the Blood Ravens Third Company had quietly permitted the terms of their Blood Trials to evolve to permit teamwork. The spectacular rise of Gabriel and Isador into the most senior ranks of the company seemed to provide evidence enough for the wisdom of this evolution. Prathios had flattered himself that this practice made the Third Company more human than some of the other Chapters, and even than some of the other companies of the Blood Ravens. Besides which, it was no secret that the Chapter was increasingly in need of initiates, as its numbers began to dwindle. Recruiting only one warrior from each trial no longer seemed like an option: new measures for new needs. However, for the first time in many decades, Prathios realised that he had some doubts about how to conduct the Blood Trials when the *Litany of Fury* arrived at Trontiux III and then Lorn V. Perhaps Space Marines were not meant to be so human after all?

"None of us want this, Gabriel," said Prathios eventually, "but we must each act as our responsibilities dictate."

“You want me to read it?” asked Gabriel. “Or do you want me to pass it along to the Chapter Masters? Perhaps you would prefer if I sent it directly to the Ordo Hereticus? Is that not my duty?”

There was an injection of venom in Gabriel’s voice that made Prathios smart. He knew that duty and responsibility did not always coincide, and that the first did not always make the second bearable.

“It is not for me to say, captain,” replied Prathios honestly. “My place is to look after your spiritual well-being, and hence I can simply advise you to act as your responsibilities and duties dictate. Librarian Isador Akios was a leading figure in the Third Company of the Emperor’s Blood Ravens. He was an initiate of the Ordo Psykana, he was a precious member of your command team, he was a powerful warrior, our battle-brother, and... and he was our friend, Gabriel.”

Gabriel nodded in resignation—he knew that he could not expect his Chaplain to make this decision for him, and he knew that the responsibility was his, as it had been for innumerable difficult questions before now. He had borne the responsibility for the extermination of his own homeworld, out of duty to the Emperor and his Chapter. It was his duty to shoulder these things, no matter what the personal cost. Not for the first time, he wished that the long and painful process of becoming a Blood Raven could have eradicated his humanity and left him only with a sense of duty. He had heard rumours that this was true of some of the other Chapters of Space Marines. But he also knew that his emotions gave him types of knowledge that mere calculation and duty could not—intuitive knowledge was still knowledge, if you knew how to handle it. And knowledge is power.

“Knowledge is power,” muttered Gabriel as he ran his fingers over the metallic cover of the book in front of him.

“Guard it well,” intoned Prathios, as though automatically completing the motto of the Blood Ravens.

“Yes,” said Gabriel, as he realised the particular salience of that deeply imbedded maxim. “Knowledge is power—guard it well.”

With a new sense of resolution and certainty, he opened Isador’s journal to the last page, where he saw the characteristically elaborate and decorative script of his old friend. Even in his personal log, the former Librarian kept the kind of immaculate record that he had demanded of all Blood Ravens—when knowledge is power, every last detail needed to be recorded, lest the vital information be lost through carelessness.

Gabriel nodded in recognition of the diligence of his one-time friend, but then he started to read and he recoiled in shock.

That fool Gabriel has no idea what's happening on this blessed world. He thinks that the approaching warp storm is to be feared, and that the artefacts we have found must be destroyed. Such blindness. How much will this stupidity cost us? How far can I permit this to go?

Even if the others cannot, I can see the mania in his eyes, and I know the secrets of the voices that he hides from us, those that sing into his soul in the guise of the sacred choir. He cannot conceal these silvering tones from me. For I hear them too, but I know their nature and I know that the Emperor has not blessed them. This is the difference between my old friend and me: I can tell the difference between truth and lies, for my soul has been wrought and tested in the secret fires of the great Librarium Sanatorium, and yet it is the bumbling, ignorant captain that leads our company into error and stupidity.

The Great Father would lament the idiocy of his favoured son—how far removed from his own nature are the children of Vidya? Have the Blood Ravens really regressed so far that they no longer see the wisdom of placing Librarians in charge of their affairs? Did Vidya mean nothing? Why does Gabriel persist in ignoring me? Does he really think that he is better than I am? He would not even be here were it not for me—he couldn't have pieced together the pieces of this Tartaran puzzle. In truth, he would have died back on Cyrene with the other aspirants all those decades ago. I have carried him for too long, and now he cannot even see that I'm doing it.

If Gabriel has neither the vision nor the will to harness the power of the Maledictum for the Blood Ravens and the Emperor, then I will do it myself. The time has come for me to step out of the tainted shadow of the misguided captain. His fate is sealed already by my reports to the Order of the Lost Rosetta—they will see to it that the Third Company will be in need of a new commander soon, and I will show the Blood Ravens that such positions should be filled by visionary Librarians once again. The Blood Ravens will recapture the nature of Azariah Vidya, even if we must pay the bloody costs of our own cleansing... and Gabriel should know all about such costs.

Gabriel pushed the book away from him, unable to read on. His face was white and his eyes burned dryly, as though he had been struck with acid. From the shadows behind him, Prathios could see the captain's shoulders tense and the muscles in his back bunch.

The book slid across the polished surface of the table, but stopped just short of falling off the edge, left teetering precariously on the point of balance. It

pivoted slightly on the lip, as though mocking them.

“Have you read this, Prathios?” Gabriel’s voice betrayed something uneven in his soul.

Silence answered him in the place of a confirmation.

“That is not an answer,” snapped Gabriel, turning in his chair to face the Chaplain for the first time. “Have you read this, Chaplain Prathios?”

For the first time since they had met when Prathios had recruited him on Cyrene, Gabriel saw the falterings of doubt creased into the Chaplain’s features. There was another pause, but then Prathios found his voice at last. “Yes, captain. I have read parts of it. More than enough. And yet not enough... Enough to know that prudence dictates that it requires your attention before that of any other authority, Gabriel. It is a volatile document, old friend.”

Peering through the shadows, Gabriel’s eyes burned like flaming emeralds, tingeing eerily between green and blue. For a moment, Prathios thought that he saw something alien buried inside, a Gabriel that he had never known seemed to lurk in the recesses of his hidden heart.

Blinking out the light, Gabriel turned back to the table and reached out for the book. He drew it back towards him and opened it forcefully, letting the pages fall arbitrarily near the start of the volume.

I have watched this man for over a hundred years. He has always made his offerings to the Emperor at each of the designated times of the day, dutifully and with firmness of resolution. But something inexplicable has changed in the nature of his observances since Cyrene—it has become gradually impossible to deny that the subtle changes have become substantive. I wonder whether there is a need for me to act on this, or perhaps to seek advice from Chaplain Prathios.

This morning I found Gabriel kneeling in prayer in the chapel, as the Litany of Fury pushed into the Tartarus system. We had already seen the first dregs of ork vessels littering the outer reaches, and the captain should have been on the control deck.

I found him without his armour and apparently transfixed. When I called his name, it was as though he could not hear me at all. This is not unheard of amongst more pious Marines, but when I persisted his response was violent. As though possessed by some primal instinct, he grasped out at my neck, before I struck him back into awareness. As I looked into his distraught and confused features, I witnessed a single tear of blood run down his face—like the jewel of the Blood Ravens itself. Not for the first time, I was alarmed to see that his eyes seemed to flicker between green and blue.

For a moment, I might have forgotten that he is not a Librarian, for I have only ever seen such soul-shifts amongst rare initiates of the Librarium Sanatorium. Yet Gabriel has never set foot in those hallowed halls. He was never deemed worthy of that elated calling. Even Prathios did not judge him able to withstand the long years of psychic torment involved. And yet now I wonder whether he has even been able to withstand the psychic trauma of his duties on Cyrene.

He is quite changed. His piety has become laced with mania.

I must seek the guidance of the Chaplain before the campaign on Tartarus really begins.

Gabriel ran his hands over his closely-cropped hair, staring at the immaculate script in front of him. Perhaps for the first time, he realised the potential dangers of the near-fanatical tendency of Blood Ravens Librarians to record everything. In the past, he had asked Isador about the documentary practices of the librarium, but his old friend had invariably demurred, muttering something about the appropriate designations of knowledge, clearly indicating that it was not the place of a Space Marine captain to know too much about the affairs of the librarium.

It was certainly true that the Librarium Sanatorium operated with unusual and well-guarded secrecy in the Blood Ravens, almost as though it were an institution in its own right, and Gabriel had often wondered whether its exclusive status within the Chapter was an idiosyncrasy or a generic aspect of the Codex Astartes. He knew that it even contained its own levels—*designations* as they were called—including a shadowy and elite order called the Psykana. But even the Chapter Masters would not be drawn on this question, perhaps because the majority of them were also Librarians. Not for the first time, the image of Azariah Vidya floated into his mind, and Gabriel realised that the legacy of the Great Father was a complicated one for the Blood Ravens.

All he knew about the documentary practices was what he had seen with his own eyes: Librarians and their scribes were expected to record all events and impressions that might have significance for the Blood Ravens themselves or for the furtherance of knowledge. Each battle-barge and strike cruiser would then submit copies of all their records to the great librarium aboard the Omnis Arcanum whenever they rendezvoused, hence ensuring that the legendary central repository always contained the complete, collected knowledge of the Chapter. Knowledge was most valuable when it became a resource for the Chapter, rather than merely the musings of an individual. Knowledge is power, pondered

Gabriel as he turned a few more pages.

The Tartaran Colonel Brom has complained about Gabriel's conduct during the battle for Magna Bonum today. He made a series of intimations about the Blood Ravens' predilection for aerial bombardments, following the captain's decision to call for support from the Litany of Fury. It is true that the result was the levelling of Brom's precious city, which I can understand that he did not appreciate. However, it is also true that the bombardment broke the greenskins, and without it we might not have prevailed, despite the glory of our stand at the South Gate.

Note: we must discover the source of these rumours about the Third Company—it seems highly unusual for such information to travel so quickly. The implications are that there are forces working against us somewhere in the Imperium, spreading these stories deliberately. This requires urgent attention.>>

Gabriel understands the orks much better than Brom, and he knows that they fight for our annihilation, not for our cities. It is not Brom's place to question the captain, although I can understand his resentment—this is his homeworld. I can only imagine how Gabriel would have reacted had somebody else made the decision to exterminate Cyrene... but I know how it feels to see Gabriel make such a decision about my home. I was with him on that day; I was on the control deck of the Litany, standing at Gabriel's shoulder and watching our planet burn.

I do not doubt the wisdom of Gabriel's decision here, or before—Cyrene was lost, and sacrifices must be made in the name of the Emperor. Especially sacrifices of blood. But seeing Brom today, I realise that I resented my detachment from the destruction. Whilst I stood squarely at my captain's shoulder, it was he who signalled the Ordo Hereticus, and it was he who finally commanded the Exterminatus. As he has stated repeatedly since then: it was his responsibility, not mine.

Like knowledge, it seems that responsibility has its own designations—although in the person and example of Vidya these were united gloriously. Surely this should be the model for the Blood Ravens? Responsibility should be grasped in the hands of those with superior knowledge, for knowledge is power.

Lest I should be misunderstood by my peers in the librarium should they ever read this: I am not claiming that Gabriel was wrong. Far from it—his decisions were probably correct. However, being right is not finally the point, since even an ork can be right from time to time. It is merely probability, not heresy, to observe that one in an infinite number of illiterate orks could accidentally pen the Codex Astartes. But, of course, writing the text is not the point at all, the

point is the appropriate intentionality behind it, and the will to live it. The prodigal ork could not be said to be responsible for the text, since it could have no understanding of its significance.

In other words, the issue for the Imperium of Man is to whom it awards the right to be right, so that the responsibility for good decisions lies with those most able to make them. It can be no accident, then, that our greatest leaders have all been powerful psykers—our forefather the Emperor himself and our own Great Father Azariah Vidya. In these examples we must see the model for the designation of responsibility.

To be responsible is to understand. And I wonder whether Gabriel can truly grasp the significance of his decisions, whether they are tactically sound or not. He is rash and instinctual—yesterday he screamed through the battle at the pumping station like a man possessed, not even noticing the damage that he himself had sustained. He is dismissive of those who might know more about this place—including of Brom and even myself. He is obsessed with responsibility, even at the expense of knowledge. He may have been tactically right about Magna Bonum today, but only coincidentally.

I see the psychic scar of Cyrene in his manner. But he does not see the connections between our homeworld and this ork-infested planet. Yesterday afternoon I heard them whispered by the shadows of the forest itself, as though Tartarus is aware of its place in the galaxy and of the way that the Blood Ravens sow these distances together.

Today my curators unearthed some interesting material on the history of this mysterious planet. It seems that a number of Blood Ravens have been here before, long ago, before the official records of the planet began. One of them, the distinguished Librarian Prothius, served in the Deathwatch on a mission here. As an initiate of our Ordo Psykana, he dutifully recorded his findings in our great library, but it also seems likely that reports would have been filed with the Ordo Xenos. I have requested a transcription scribe from the Psykana to produce a copy of his report; it should arrive shortly.

Given this information, I would not be surprised to see an Inquisitorial presence here in due time—they too must have records of what unfolded here all those centuries ago.

In transfixed and horrified disbelief, Gabriel turned a few more pages.

* * *

We all fear what we do not understand, such is the bane of the Blood Ravens and the converse of our thirst for knowledge. But the real question concerns how we respond to that fear—whether we seek to hide away from it, seeking to immerse ourselves in false certainties, or whether we embrace the fear and use it to fuel our quest for more questions and more doubts. It is only in the fires of uncertainty that our souls can be cleansed and bettered.

And yet Gabriel destroyed the ancient altar that we found in the pit. Perhaps he could not see its value, or perhaps he feared its tainted and blood-soaked nature. But it could not have been hidden to him that I perceived its importance. Indeed, I asked him for more time to study it, and I was denied. It does me no credit to say so, but it is almost as though he sought to deprive me of that which he knew he could not understand. This is not the spirit of scholarship that we might expect from the valiant captain. It seems that Prathios was right when he decided not to push Gabriel into the tortuous path of the Librarian, over a hundred years ago—such an attitude would sit even more poorly in the mind of a Librarian. To be more cynical, might it be that Gabriel has something to hide here?

I saw the eldar runes interlaced with the crude cultists' etchings on the altar, and I even removed the ancient symbol of Treraum, or “storm”, but Gabriel did not want to hear of it. Even after I had led him to the base of Mount Korath, he still doubted my wisdom and my tactical sense. I could hear the psychic echoes of his hostility and doubt like whispers in my mind. But I knew that the eldar menhir awaited us, and my resolve was firm. It was not until the cursed eldar themselves appeared in the Pass of Korath that Gabriel was finally forced to concede the truth of my knowledge.

Perhaps, had he listened before, Corallis would not be so seriously wounded. As a result, he has found himself unable to thwart my investigation of the menhir, much as he would like to destroy it and move on. He has promised me more time for this artefact, but I can feel that he has done so to make peace with me, not because he believes in the pursuit of knowledge. In other words, he has surrendered to my will out of weakness, out of fear of my knowledge, fear of my displeasure, and perhaps even fear about a dereliction of duty, which makes me lose still more respect for him.

I had never thought that it would come to this.

I dare not tell him of the power of this place, nor of the way that it whispers its secrets into my mind, picking me out from amongst our company as the one most able to understand. He will not understand—he cannot understand, for it was not he that was chosen. And through his lack of understanding, he will

destroy our chance of appropriating this great power for the Blood Ravens. Even the unearthly voices from the depths of Tartarus understand his inadequacies; there is no need for him to know.

* * *

Closing the book carefully, Gabriel pushed his chair back away from the table and turned to face Prathios, who had remained unmoving in the shadows of the small chamber. Despite himself, the Chaplain found himself taking half a step back as he met the intensity of his captain's eyes.

"When did you know of all this, Chaplain?"

"Librarian Akios did not share the details with me, captain, and I have not read them all. I read enough to know that the tome should come to you, and I brought it to you as soon as that became clear."

"I'm not sure that is an answer to my question."

"Isador came to me as we entered the Tartarus system to express some concerns about your... emotional well-being," answered Prathios, choosing his words delicately. "He was concerned that you were not at peace with the events of Cyrene, and wondered whether I had also noticed anything of this nature."

"And?"

"Captain?"

"And had you noticed anything of this nature?"

There was a slight pause, in which Prathios realised that this was not the time for circumspection. "Yes, captain, I had."

"I see," replied Gabriel flatly, clearly aware that he had confessed enough to the Chaplain to make this observation obvious. "And when did Isador entrust you with this record?"

"Shortly before we moved on the Temple of Dannan, captain. But I had neither an opportunity nor a reason to open it until... until after the Tartaran campaign was concluded."

"I understand, Prathios. Thank you. You may leave, and you may now trust that I will take the appropriate measures with this report. It is in my hands now, as it should be, and it is my responsibility."

With that, Gabriel turned away from the Chaplain and returned to the book at the desk. He sat quietly without opening the cover until Prathios realised that the captain was waiting for him to leave. So dismissed, he bowed slightly and then walked crisply out of the room.

The report that I have been awaiting from the Litany of Fury arrived today. It makes interesting reading. I refer you to the Omnis Arcanum LS archive 38.999/CX324.99i for the full text, in which the complete records of Psykana Librarian Prothius can be read. Even all those millennia ago, it seems that the Librarians of the Blood Ravens were meticulous in their record keeping, which is something of which we should be proud.

I am pleased to be able to report that the account of the honourable Prothius confirms my interpretation of the eldar text on the menhir that we discovered on the summit of Korath (which Gabriel generously consented not to destroy until after I had inspected it), as well as my intuitions about the powers that pulse through this place.

It appears that Prothius was here on Tartarus as one of his duties during his third secondment to the revered Deathwatch. He reports that the Inquisition was fully aware of the blood-drenched history of the planet, and that the kill-team's mission had been timed to coincide with the presence of an eldar force, which the Ordo Xenos knew would be on Tartarus every three thousand years in order to do battle with a greater cyclic-daemon. It seems that two of our Blood Ravens were chosen for this mission, presumably because the eldar in question were Biel Tan. (It seems that there are those in the Ordo Xenos who are not without knowledge of the Blood Ravens, after all.) In addition to Prothius, the famed Captain Trythos was seconded to lead the mission.

It is with some regret that I note the fall of the Dreadnought Trythos during the battle for Lloovre Man, although my regret is coloured by the account by Prothius, as I will explain.>>

Prothius does not record the source of the Inquisition's knowledge about the details of the Biel Tan's preparations for this encounter, but we may surmise them ourselves from other sources.

I would like to make a note of concern about our contacts in the Inquisition: Inquisitor Toth reported to Gabriel and myself today that Trythos was the first ever Blood Raven to serve in the Deathwatch. He made no mention of Prothius, whom we know had served twice before the mission in 999.M38. From this we might surmise three things: first, that the inquisitor is simply poorly informed, since the integrity and meticulous exactitude of our own records cannot be doubted; second, that the inquisitor has been properly informed but that he is deliberately attempting to deceive us; and third, that the report of the good Captain Trythos (on which Toth must be basing his knowledge) deliberately excluded the contribution made by Prothius, perhaps because of a disdain for Librarians that seems to retain echoes in parts of our Chapter to this day. Trythos

was not himself a Librarian, and hence the imperative and ability to produce perfect records would have been absent from his mind.

The second option demands a further question: why would Toth seek to deceive us? Unfortunately, I do not have enough information to answer this question, but I might posit two possibilities: the first is that the inquisitor is aware of the perfect records of our Librarium Sanatorium (perhaps even of our Ordo Psykana itself) and that he is seeking to obscure the role of our Librarians in this affair in the hope that we will not check these archives and thus discover the truth. Unfortunately, this explanation gives Toth both too much credit (for knowledge) and not enough (for intelligence). However, it occurs to me that this thesis reflects the pervasive and primitive fear of Librarians that I have also perceived in the manner of our own good captain recently. Perhaps this character-atrophy is not limited to our Chapter, but rather has become a characteristic of the Imperium at large? This convinces me further that action is required.

And the second explanation is even more sinister, since it suggests that there are forces at work in the Inquisition that are deliberately attempting to sabotage the Blood Ravens Third Company. This ties in with the fact that rumours of the Cyrene incident had somehow reached Colonel Brom before our arrival. Whatever the explanation, I advise that the Chapter Masters should be informed that our contacts in the Ordo Xenos must be re-screened, perhaps through the use of false information. We should start with the Order of the Lost Rosetta.>>

Gabriel furrowed his brow and ran his hand across the scar on his cheek, trying to make sense of Isador's reasoning. It lacked the rigorous logic that he had come to expect of a Blood Ravens Librarian, and it seemed to be run through with paranoia about the status of the Chapter and, in particular, of Librarians themselves. Isador's mind appeared to be full of fears and doubts, as though his thoughts had been contaminated with some kind of slow-acting poison. For the first time, Gabriel realised that it might have been Isador rather than himself who had been affected by the destruction of Cyrene.

Isador also made occasional mention of voices whispering truths into his mind, and Gabriel knew enough of the ways of Librarians to know that this was not normal even for them. It was slowly dawning on him that his old friend had probably been going mad. Perhaps the insidious power of the Maledictum had been attempting to seduce him since their arrival on Tartarus, just as the entrapped daemon had been working its slow, seeping sorcery on the whole population of the planet for millennia.

Was this what Isador meant when he said that there were connections with Cyrene? It had been clear there that the minds of psykers were much more sensitive to corruption than those without such abilities, although the psychic citizens of Cyrene were nascent, not honed like Isador. Nonetheless, Gabriel saw once again the wisdom of seeking to divorce psychic potentialities from command structures in the Chapter—with great power comes tremendous risk. Vidya had been the exception that proved the rule, not a model to be followed unquestioningly. And none could hope to emulate the syncretic glories of the Emperor himself, not even the Great Father. At the end of the day, it was merely a human will that had to keep even magnificent powers under control. And every human will had its breaking point. Even some of the primarchs were broken during the Heresy, after all.

Were the whispers that sang symphonies into his own mind those of the daemon that had addressed him as its herald only days before? Were there elements of truth lurking in the rantings of Isador?

The honourable Prothius had made a study of the so-called “Fall” of the Cyclopean Primarch from scholarship and psychic discipline into the forbidden and dark arts of sorcery. His commentary is fascinating, incisive and original, and I would recommend it as reading for all initiates of our Librarium Sanatorium.

It seems that the purpose of his commentary was to explain his actions on Tartarus but, more broadly, it provides an eloquent defence and justification of the scholarly nature of our Chapter. As appears to be happening today, it appears that the efficacy and trustworthiness of psykers and their research into the invisible or hidden realms was under the closest scrutiny at that time. Prothius was not blind to the irony of the Imperium’s twin need and disdain for powerful psykers and the mysterious, unearthly knowledge that underlied their powers. Indeed, it seems that his commentary was inspired by his Deathwatch mission on Tartarus, during which an Inquisitorial representative of the Emperor’s Ordo Xenos commanded him to recover a fragment of the eldar’s Wailing Doom for research and use as a potentially powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Imperium. Of course, such missions are amongst the most important and interesting tasks of the Deathwatch, which must be why the Blood Ravens have been honoured by secondment into their sacred ranks so often.

When I consider the attitudes of Inquisitor Toth and Captain Angelos on our present mission, I am struck by their lack of vision and understanding. They do not appear to understand the potential value of recovering the Maledictum for

ourselves. Rather they seem to seek to destroy it. They are the lesser sons of Inquisitor Jhordine and Captain Trythos. And it seems that I am destined to play the role of the heir of Prothius, even against the blindness of my battle-brothers if necessary.

Lest the deeds that I am planning here be misunderstood as betrayal, I would like to present an interpretation of Prothius' commentary as the parameters of my own behaviour. Then, before I move in pursuit of truth, knowledge and power (as it is my duty and my calling to do) I will entrust this account into the care of Chaplain Prathios so that the Blood Ravens will understand my actions, even if they no longer have the vision to accept them. I pray to the Great Father and to the Emperor of Man that Gabriel does not stand in my way and that he will honour my deeds as a Blood Raven should. If he does not, then all is lost for our once magnificent brethren.

Prothius provides a wholly persuasive commentary on the formulation of the Edicts of Nikaea, which still delimit the freedoms of Librarians to this day. He demonstrates persuasively that they were the result of the cowardice of the psychically impotent, making reference to certain cerebrally-stunted figures. Indeed, Prothius located a copy of the "Grimoire Hereticus" in which it is stated very clearly that a number of Librarians at what he calls the "Hearing of the Thousands" attempted to storm from the hall, horrified that such a reactionary and misguided debate was taking place. Other records unearthed by Prothius, such as the epic ballad "Prospero's Lament" imply there had always been a certain atmosphere of jealousy and distrust towards the psychically gifted, even amongst the sons of the Emperor himself. The psychically blind feared what they could not understand, just as they do today.

Prothius himself recovered the forbidden "Tome of Mordance", which was allegedly penned by the Sorcerer Lord Mordant Hex. It was rumoured to have been found abandoned in the Etiamnun Reclusium, after the hermits of that quiet world had been slaughtered by a force of Space Marines who were in search of a hidden webway portal that might have led to the great halls of learning of the Black Library. In this tortuous text, it is written that even the Cyclopean Primarch had never lost faith in the Emperor, but rather that he was hounded and driven from his father's side by the scheming jealousies of his lesser brothers.

Thus it was that the weak-minded and the fools sowed the seeds of distrust in psychic powers that persist to this day, and they turned the Imperium against these glories simply out of ignorance, fear and jealousy. Had the Emperor but placed his faith in superior knowledge rather than brute force, the galaxy may

have been saved from the horrors of the wars that followed. Knowledge is power, but even at the time of the Emperor himself those with knowledge and power were viewed with suspicion by lesser men. So it is with me today. Gabriel resents my superiority, and he seeks to prevent my ascension to levels that he can never understand. Having no way to know whether these heights are sacred or heretical, his fear drives him to obstruct me. His inadequacies haunt him like the souls of those he slaughtered on Cyrene.

In other words, it is the fear of the unknown rather than the love of knowledge that is to be eradicated and controlled. This is why Azariah Vidya should be the model for the Blood Ravens—like Magnus (even more than the Emperor himself, since he finally bowed to the pressure of ignorant fools), Vidya personified the unity of knowledge and power. As it was for him, so it should be now: the Librarians should command the Blood Ravens—it should be me, not Gabriel, who takes responsibility for our actions. Gabriel is a blind fool whose weak mind has been addled by responsibilities that it can neither understand nor hope to comprehend.

Not unlike the falsely-cursed Prospero, Cyrene was a planet with well-developed nascent psykers and communes of sorcery. It was a place of wonder. But rather than utilising his power to save the souls of his homeworld and the knowledge that they cherished, Gabriel reacted to this realisation with fear and loathing, summoning the Exterminatus and razing the planet to the ground. He did not have the courage to stand up for a truth that even the Emperor could not understand or condone. Can there be any greater sense of stupidity, impotence or irresponsibility? Had he been willing to pay the price of excommunication in the name of truth, he should have made a stand that might have led to him being branded a heretic and a traitor. But he lacked the vision. Unlike the short-sighted fool, I am willing to be misunderstood—indeed, I am now resigned to it. But knowledge is power, and I must guard it well.

There seemed to be some logic and reason in Isador's words, but they stung Gabriel's eyes as he read them. There was something so profoundly wrong with the sentiments of the text that they caused him physical pain. Even worse, he was struggling to understand where Isador's argument was flawed. Like Magnus at the notorious "Hearing of the Thousands", about which all Blood Ravens of command rank were taught, Isador's words were eloquent and persuasive without necessarily being right. There was an important distinction to be made between having the power to convince others of the truth of your knowledge, and actually have the power of knowing the truth. One of the things that all

commanders of the Blood Ravens were trained to do was to intuit precisely this distinction, and Gabriel could feel the signs of clever persuasion masking the truth in Isador's words.

Pushing the book away from him, as though its very presence obstructed his clarity of mind, Gabriel sat back into his chair and closed his eyes. He concentrated, trying to recall what he had been told about the events that Isador had narrated from the reports of Prothius. So adhesive were Isador's clever words that it took him several minutes to cleanse his thoughts and to remember what he would have taken as absolute truth only an hour earlier. Even then, the horror of Isador's blasphemies about the Emperor's character still lingered in the shadows of his mind. He had never heard anyone dare to give voice to such thoughts before, and for the first time in his life he thought that he could understand a glimmer of what it might have been like to have lived through the terrible days of the Heresy itself.

It was true, recalled Gabriel, that the "Hearing of the Thousands", as it was referred to in the archives of the Blood Ravens, had become perceived as a legal and moral trial regarding the rectitude of psychic powers and sorcery. One side had argued that there was nothing inherently evil about any kinds of knowledge, and that the problem lay only in the uses to which it was put. This was a defence of the right to scholarship and inquiry into the sorcerous arts, as well as an assertion that certain Space Marines were more than capable of harnessing such knowledge for the good of the Imperium. The logic dictated that depriving the legions of these resources would effectively deprive the Imperium of its greatest powers. It is conjectured in the "Apocrypha of Haidyes" that a variation on the slogan that would eventually become the maxim of the Blood Ravens, "Knowledge is power, and we should seek it relentlessly," was employed during the Hearing, although its source is not identified.

The other side of the debate insisted that psychic powers were inherently unstable and that because not everyone with such powers might also display the kind of strength of will required to control them properly, their use should be tightly controlled and delimited.

The Librarians and Marines of the Blood Ravens had discussed this debate over and over again, trying to understand the significance and meaning of its various possible outcomes, as well as its actual historical outcome all those millennia before. The debate was part of their heritage and an essential problematic at the heart of their identity—all Blood Ravens would be exposed to elements of the discussion during their hypno-conditioning.

According to the *Ravonicum Rex*, an ancient and possibly apocryphal text

that was kept under guard in the deepest recesses of the Librarium Sanatorium aboard the *Omnis Arcanum*, there were those amongst the Gathering of the Thousands that had sought compromise, seeing the merits of each side of the intractable debate. The relevant sections of the *Ravonicum* had remained hotly debated within the lore of the Blood Ravens, despite the mysteriousness of their origins. Vidya himself makes reference to them in his classic text, *Pax Psykana*. Vidya's text alludes to the existence of a complete copy of the *Ravonicum* that vanished during the attack of the eldar Harlequins at the raid of Quarab.

As he considered the conventional lore of his Chapter, Gabriel finally realised the critical logical perversion of Isador's argument: it rested upon the dismissal of the Emperor. For Isador, there was a level of knowledge and truth that transcended not only the person of the Emperor himself, but even transcended the Emperor's comprehension. Hence, Isador's argument rested upon the assertion that he was not only the equal but actually superior to the Emperor. This was the worst kind of heresy.

Furthermore, Isador's position de-recognised the function of wisdom, law and duty in the Imperium. In other words, it ignored the question of responsibility. Isador neglected the possibility that the Emperor was fully aware of the powers that he was depriving his children, but that his superior wisdom told him that even the minds of the primarchs could not hope to withstand such terrible pressures and temptations for long.

How much less so could the minds of Librarians, Space Marines, or normal humans? Laws cannot accommodate exceptions, and so the Edicts of Nikaea were promulgated for the good of the whole Imperium—to prevent the weak from damaging themselves and others, all members of the Imperium, including those who might be strong enough to cope with them, would be forbidden from certain designations of knowledge. It then became a matter of duty and responsibility for the primarchs and the Legions to uphold these Edicts as law. To fail to do so, even in the name of greater knowledge and power, would be to undermine the fabric of the Emperor's Imperium itself.

“Duty before all else,” muttered Gabriel to himself. Out of all the Chapters of Space Marines, the Blood Ravens had a special reason to embrace this truism, he reflected, letting his mind shift back to the screaming faces of Cyrene that still haunted his dreams. That is why our Chapter Masters insist on a mixture of Marines and Librarians in the command structure.

“I did my duty,” he murmured. “The Blood Ravens did not seek to save our tainted homeworld through the exercise of great power. We cleansed it in the name of the Great Father and the Emperor, just as we did on Tartarus.

“We might have sought to harness the innate power of the nascent psykers and the mutants there, cultivating them into powerful warriors, as legend tells us once happened on Prospero. However, that would have been a perversion, a heresy: knowledge and power before all else, pursued relentlessly. To act in this way would be a dereliction of duty. It would be a failure of responsibility. It would have been wrong.

“Knowledge is power, so it must be guarded well and given the respect of wisdom and duty.

“I have exterminated my own homeworld—the homeworld of Isador and of the Great Father himself. And I did so out of pristine duty. That is why the Emperor’s Astronomican soars into my mind, confirming my place at the shoulder of Vidya in the shimmering tones of the silver choir. I enact their will, not my own.”

Flicking over to the last page of Isador’s report once again, Gabriel gazed down at the words that had horrified him only hours before:

That fool Gabriel has no idea what’s happening on this blessed world. He thinks that the approaching warp storm is to be feared, and that the artefacts we have found must be destroyed. Such blindness. How much will this stupidity cost us? How far can I permit this to go?

Even if the others cannot, I can see the mania in his eyes, and I know the secrets of the voices that he hides from us, those that sing into his soul in the guise of the sacred choir. He cannot conceal these silvering tones from me. For I hear them too, but I know their nature and I know that the Emperor has not blessed them. This is the difference between my old friend and me: I can tell the difference between truth and lies, for my soul has been wrought and tested in the secret fires of the great Librarium Sanatorium, and yet it is the bumbling, ignorant captain that leads our Company into error and stupidity.

Reading through those words again, Gabriel could not help but feel the horror of their power once more. He was sure that Isador had gone insane, tempted out of his right-mind by the whispered seductions of daemons, vanity, and promises of secret knowledge. And yet, interlaced and curdled through the complicated text Gabriel could sense threads of truth and flickers of light.

As he stared at the page, his mind flashed with images of the daemon that he had unleashed from the Maledictum on Tartarus. It had taunted him with its gratitude, calling him its herald rather than its vanquisher, as though he had been guided through his actions like some kind of puppet. And the thoughts of the

eldar farseer had riddled his mind, competing with the daemon in its ridicule of his weakness of will. And then there were the screaming faces of Cyrene, coagulating and gyring through his waking dreams, like razor-wire being stirred through his brain. Somehow, Gabriel knew that Isador must be right that there were important connections between these haunting visions that he could neither comprehend nor even admit to anyone else. Despite everything, Gabriel found himself wishing that Isador was still with him.

With a nod of resolution, Gabriel withdrew his pistol from its harness and took careful aim. The shell seared cleanly through the cable that supported the lighting-orb over the desk. He watched it fall, as though in slow motion, seeing the complicated array of filaments and flames inside it begin to splutter and fade through its descent. Then, in an explosion of glass and gas, the orb crashed down onto Isador's book. For a fraction of a second the room plunged into darkness, but then a residual spark ignited the ballooning gas and the book erupted into flames.

As he watched the complicated and dangerous journal burn into cinders before him, Gabriel gazed into the flames, letting his eyes fixate as his mind continued to race with everything that he had just read. And, as the flames started to fade, his mind began to calm. A single, distant voice started to sing with exquisite precision and metallic coolness. After a few seconds, the voice was all that he could see and hear, echoing and resounding through his mind like a refracted star. Gradually, other voices joined the first, peppering his mind with points of starlight until his head seemed to encompass an entire galaxy. As he watched, the breathtaking vision began to swirl and tinge with red, and Gabriel knew that mysterious choir of voices was soaked through with blood and death. He did not know what it was, and he realised that Isador had been right about at least one thing: he feared what he did not understand.