

A RAVEN GUARD STORY

WITH BAITED BREATH

GEORGE MANN



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WITH BAITED BREATH

George Mann

The corpse was staring at him from across the floor of the ruined acropolis. Its one remaining eye was yellowed and fixed, and Trooper Sergei Asdic thought he could still see the terror etched into the dead man's expression, his mouth set in a rictus howl.

Could the dead still judge? Perhaps they could. Sergei couldn't help but feel his fallen comrade was somehow appraising him as he lay there, watching him die. Wondering how he had ended up dead, while he was still – just about – drawing breath. Perhaps that was just wishful thinking on his part, ascribing some modicum of continued existence to the deceased. He supposed he'd find out, soon enough.

He was slumped against a heap of fallen masonry, his now-useless legs splayed out before him. He was beginning to feel light-headed, now, and everything had taken on a slightly unreal aspect. He coughed, and bubbles of bright blood burst on his lips. The movement made his belly spasm in pain, and his hands went involuntarily to the site of his suppurating wound. He moaned as he attempted to shift himself, in order to better prop himself up and minimise the bleeding. Not that it would do him much good. He knew he was beyond saving now, even if there had been anyone there to help.

Around him, the acropolis was littered with the deceased. His corpse would soon be one among many – just another anonymous statistic, nameless in death. He almost wished the Plague Marine had finished him off swiftly, like the others. That way, at least he wouldn't have to sit there awaiting the inevitable, wracked with pain and fear.

Sergei surveyed the remains of his fallen comrades, a sea of limbs upon the broken flagstones. In their midst was the enormous, festering corpse of the Plague Marine, its outstretched fist still clutching the blade that had pierced his guts only a short while earlier. Its power armour was rusted and broken, its necrotic, bloated flesh pushing out through the cracks and seams like malleable, festering putty. Its helmet was half corroded where its acid breath had chewed large chunks in the vents. The head was lolling to one side, almost separated from the shoulders by a fortuitous, desperate shot from Sergei's lasrifle. Strange circular symbols had been daubed on its shoulder plates in livid green paint, and maggots still picked their way through its exposed, blackened entrails. The stench was nauseating. Sergei averted his eyes.

Behind the bloodied litter of the dead, above the jagged teeth of the shattered wall, the sky was the colour of burnished gunmetal, as if the war raging below had in some way scorched the very air itself.

The distant howl of projectiles and the scream of rending plasteel told him that the battle still raged on outside the strange, tomblike atmosphere of the acropolis. He would not see it end, but he knew that he had done his duty, and that the drop pods which had fallen from the sky only a few hours earlier had brought not only reinforcements, but hope of salvation. The Emperor's finest warriors had come amongst them, thundering out of the void itself, and they would drive the foul taint of Chaos from Andricor and the entire Sargassian Reach. He took comfort in that, at least. Andricor had not been forsaken.

Sergei sensed movement and turned his head toward it, wincing as the motion set off another burst of pain in his guts.

There was no one there. He fumbled by his side, his fingers searching out the barrel of his lasrifle. He snatched it up, placing it across his lap.

'Who's there?' he asked. 'Show yourself!'

If it was an enemy hostile, he would try to take them down with another well-placed shot before he died – unless, of course, they finished him off first. In his present condition, that was a distinct possibility.

He watched the entrance to the courtyard intently, blinking away the fog of weariness that threatened to overwhelm him. His ragged breath seemed as loud as a klaxon in his ears, despite the raging sounds of the battle from all sides.

Movement again. He raised his weapon, gritting his teeth as his wound screamed in protest. He caught a glimpse of something black – something immense and black, lurking by the shattered pillar that marked one side of the entrance to the complex. His finger hovered on the trigger. He heard the crunch of a heavy footstep and readied himself, looking for his shot.

‘Hold your fire.’

The voice was commanding and clipped. Sergei hesitated.

‘State your name and rank,’ said Sergei. ‘And show yourself.’

He was having trouble holding the barrel of the lasrifle straight, but he was determined not to falter in his duty now.

Another footstep crunched on the broken masonry, and then the figure emerged into the light, and Sergei was unable to withhold a gasp.

It was a Space Marine, sheathed entirely in resplendent black power armour. Even from a few metres away he towered over him, and he had to crane his neck in order to see the front of his helm, his face hidden behind the unusual flared respirator. Both of his fists terminated in massive, arcing claws, which spat and hissed with electrical charge. His shoulder pads were emblazoned with unfamiliar white symbols, and bundles of what looked like bleached bird skulls dangled on thin chains from his belt. The Space Marine stepped towards him, and he tried to scuttle back, but his legs were unable to respond and his back was already against the wall. He tried to make himself smaller, as if that would somehow protect him from the giant.

As he came closer he could see that his armour was finely engraved with hundreds of strange runes; names, he decided, although for what purpose he could not guess. They seemed to cover almost every inch of the worn, pitted surface; a record, a list.

He searched the immediate area for others of the Space Marine’s kind, but he was alone, and he was utterly terrifying. He felt himself trembling in his presence.

The Space Marine came to a stop, looking down at him.

‘I am Captain Koryn of the Raven Guard Fourth Company,’ he said.

‘Lower your weapon.’

Sergei found himself doing as the Space Marine commanded. He placed his lasrifle back on his lap, although he kept his finger curled around the trigger, just in case he needed to defend himself quickly.

The giant cocked his head to one side, regarding him. The faceplate of his helmet remained impassive, making it impossible for him to work out what he was thinking.

‘You’re dying, trooper.’

It was a statement of fact, nothing more. The Raven Guard’s voice echoed loudly amongst the broken spurs of the building, deep and soft.

Sergei expelled a wheezing, gasping laugh, air hissing out between his clenched teeth. He glanced down at the puddle of blood that was spreading on the stone tiles beneath him.

‘I’d noticed,’ he said.

‘What is your name?’

Sergei frowned. He’d never encountered a Space Marine before, other than the traitorous monsters who had descended on his world in order to tear it apart – but he had heard tales; stories of the giants who walked amongst men, who fought shoulder to shoulder with humans in order to protect the realms of the Emperor from the deadly reach of Chaos, or the ever-present threat of xenos. But never had he heard of a Space Marine who had spoken in such a manner to a member of the Guard. He wondered what he had done to invite such interest from such a terrifying thing.

‘Trooper Sergei Asdic,’ he said. ‘Deceased.’

He smiled at his own grim joke.

The Space Marine was regarding the sea of corpses by his feet. He stooped low to examine the remains of the Plague Marine, as if anxious to ensure it was actually dead.

‘What happened here?’

‘Why?’ Sergei spoke before he’d had time to consider his words.

The Space Marine stood again and he flinched, expecting a harsh rebuttal for his question, but his shoulders heaved in an approximation of what might have been a shrug.

‘We live on through our legends. Our stories define us. Those who have committed great deeds should have their stories heard.’

Sergei laughed, and then winced at the sudden agony it caused. He glanced at the corpse of the Plague Marine.

‘Great deeds? It took twenty of us to bring down one of them. You might have done the same in a moment.’

Koryn seemed to consider this.

‘Yet you were victorious, and you sacrificed your lives in the name of the Emperor. You did so in the face of overwhelming odds. It is true that to one such as I, felling a single enemy might be nothing more than a moment’s work, but for you and your brethren, it took courage and the lives of twenty men and women. I see the greatness in this. I see sacrifice and honour. Tell your tale, trooper. Have it heard before you die.’

Sergei nodded.

‘Very well.’

He closed his eyes, summoning up the memories. They seemed like dreams to him now. It was as if years had passed, as if there had never been anything else but the battlefield, the howl of the enemy weapons, the tortured screams of the dying and the deep, throbbing pain in his belly. As if the events of just a few hours earlier had happened in another lifetime. And so he told his tale.

‘It began in darkness. The enemy came out of the night on a tide of pestilence, dragging their rotten carcasses across the muddied fields of Andricor.

‘Led by the fearsome giants of Empyrion’s Blight – lumbering, ancient warriors who had long since invited the taint of the Dark Gods to infest their once glorious bodies – they seemed intent upon only one thing: utter devastation. Planets had fallen in their wake, and the conquered had swelled their ranks, infected by the foul plague that lay siege not only to their flesh, but to their very souls.

‘I had known they were coming. My comrades and I had been deployed to defensive positions along the bastion walls after the transmissions from the neighbouring world, Auros, had suddenly ceased.

‘The Navy had formed a tight ring around the planet, warships creating a deep blockade. The path between the two worlds – difficult to navigate because of stray asteroids and rocky debris – had been shut down by a vast flotilla, and I felt confident that I would not have cause to raise my weapon or put my training to the test. The invaders would never actually set foot upon the planet. It was utterly inconceivable that they would find a way through such a dense and impenetrable blockade.

‘That night, however, I watched the flotilla burn up in the atmosphere as the enemy barges forced their way through, making short work of the Navy warships. The Imperial vessels burst against the canvas of stars like detonating fireworks, shimmering as they fragmented and burned, the wreckage tumbling to the planet below like so many falling stars. It would have been almost beautiful if I hadn’t known what it represented, how many people had died in that terrible display of firepower and brutality.

‘I had a sense then of the sheer ferocity of the enemy, the momentum with which they came at us, and I cowered. They would soon be upon us, and there was very little anyone could do.

‘Hours passed in dreadful anticipation, huddled in the cold as we awaited our fate.

‘When they finally arrived it was in their thousands, huge landing craft disgorging legions of bilious, grotesque cultists and their towering, shambling masters. They did not pause to erect a beachhead, but simply trudged across the landscape towards the Imperial fortifications and laid siege, ignoring the spitting weapon emplacements and the hail of lasfire we rained down on them from above. Scores of them fell, but others simply took their place, scrabbling over the piles of the dead, using their fallen as stepping stones to better reach the walls of the Imperial bastion.

‘The Plague Marines, no matter what we threw at them, seemed practically impervious to harm. They would judder with the impact of weapons fire, sometimes even sprawling back upon the ground with the sheer momentum of the attack, and then, damaged but unfazed, they would clamber back to their feet and continue their assault. They were relentless and unstoppable. They were death incarnate.

‘The bastion walls soon gave. It was inevitable that they would. Terrifying war engines ploughed across the battlefield, discharging explosive rounds into the foundations of the structure, chewing massive holes in the walls. We were forced to fall back, readying ourselves for the oncoming surge.

‘We knew then that the bastion was lost. And with it, all hope of survival. The Chaos forces were all-consuming. We were powerless to stop them. All we could hope for was a swift death, and to take as many of them with us as possible.

‘They burst through the metre-thick walls as if they were passing through rotten timber, bringing with them a corrosive stench that was enough to overwhelm my senses and leave me reeling with nausea. Unable to hold the line, my platoon fell back to this ancient, ruined acropolis on the hillside, where we took our positions behind the walls and tried to pick off as many of the enemy as possible.

‘It was a good defensive position, and we held out for some time. Whether it was sheer luck, or that the enemy had more pressing concerns, I cannot say, but the hours ticked by, and still we survived.

‘The battle raged on through the night. I lost all sense of time. Existence shrank to the fight, and little beyond. I became nothing but a pawn in a great game, a tool – a means of depressing the trigger on a weapon. There on the battlefield, that was the entirety of the universe. My sole aim was to stop the enemy getting any closer, to hold back the tide of their relentless assault. Somewhere at the back of my mind I knew it was all in vain, but my sense of duty and purpose, my will to protect my home world, compelled me to go on.’

Sergei started at a percussive bang from somewhere close to the acropolis, and broke off from his tale. He glanced, frightened, from side-to-side, attempting to ascertain what had happened.

‘What was that?’

Koryn twisted, looking back over his shoulder. Sergei caught sight of something moving in the distance behind him, a giant, lumbering form, hazy and indistinct: an enemy war machine, stomping inexorably toward them. He could hear the insistent thud of its footsteps. It must have seen Koryn standing there, his back to the narrow entranceway, or else picked up the sound of their voices and decided to investigate.

‘Ignore it,’ the Space Marine said. ‘Continue with your tale.’

Sergei shook his head, and then wished he hadn’t. The world seemed to keep on spinning for a moment. He felt woozy, and allowed his head to fall back against the masonry, resting for a few seconds.

‘No, I can’t. That thing... it’s coming this way.’

He struggled to raise his lasrifle.

‘Leave it,’ insisted Koryn. ‘You have little time left. Make it count.’

Koryn turned back towards him. Sergei shrugged, suppressing a laugh. It just seemed so absurd, that he should find himself here, dying amidst the corpses of his friends, talking to an armoured giant. Perhaps he was hallucinating; perhaps all of this was a feverish dream caused by his festering injury. It was difficult to tell. He decided to continue with his story.

‘Morning came suddenly, weak sunlight bleaching the horizon.

‘I continued to fire indiscriminately at the enemy lines, the backwash from my super-heated lasrifle scalding my hands and wrists. I barely noticed it any more. My flesh was blistered, my legs barely able to support me due to fatigue. Yet still I pressed on, mowing down those traitorous wretches as they came upon us.

‘They were the pus-ridden runts that had once been Imperial troops like my comrades and I, but had given themselves up to the festering giants who now walked among them, submitting to the sickening rot. I could not fathom what it was that made a man turn to the Dark Gods. The Plague Marines – they were something different, something entirely unknowable – but I detested those traitorous men who scuttled about in their wake, betrayers of all that was dear to me. They had forsaken their humanity, and for that alone, they deserved to die.

‘All around me the ground shook with the quaking thunder of artillery guns barking at the dawn. The Chaos forces had brought with them vast engines of war, and they trundled across the muddy loam, churning the ground and the ruins of the bastion as they searched out pockets of survivors.

‘As the light had blossomed over the battlefield, I realised for the first time the true scale of the devastation. The hillocks and undulations I had sensed in the gloaming were, in fact, innumerable heaps of human corpses, forming grisly dunes upon a wasteland of death. I knew then that it was over. We could hold out for no more than a few hours. We were outnumbered, and alone.

‘It was then that I heard shouting from the others and looked up to see white streamers crisscrossing the sky. Drop pods tearing furrows through

the amber morning, thudding indiscriminately into the battlefield, the impacts causing even the ground to tremble in fear and anticipation.

‘The drop pods flowered open to disgorge their cargo. At first we did not know whether they represented friend or foe, and feared the enemy was swelling their own ranks for the final push, but then something changed.

‘I was unable to see the figures who struck from the shadows, but their presence was evident in the alteration of the enemy’s behavior – the lumbering hulks of the Plague Marines turned their attentions away from the serried ranks of men and women, focusing instead on the living shadows that flitted amongst them, cutting them down where they stood. Suddenly the entire tone of the battle had changed. The enemy was confused, and in their confusion, they were falling. I sensed something from them that I had not sensed before: fear.

‘I felt emboldened by this realisation, reinvigorated. I felt hope. Help had come to Andricor. Shadows that killed. Space Marines.

‘I heard a scream from behind me and turned in time to see the lumbering bulk of a Plague Marine ripping the arm off a trooper no more than a few feet away. It had made its move while we’d been distracted, while our minds had turned to salvation, rather than death.

‘The thing was disgusting to look upon: its putrid organs hung limply from its yawning belly on stringy threads of mucus and rotten flesh. Its corroded armour was split and broken, its helmet parted by the stump of an enormous horn that had sprouted from the centre of its forehead. It carried in its hand a dripping, noxious blade, and swung it widely, cutting down swathes of my comrades as they rushed to join combat.

‘I brought my lasrifle up and loosed off a series of shots, catching the beast square in the face, but it barely seemed to notice the searing burns as it swatted at more of the troopers, snapping their necks or crushing them underfoot. I saw Dole try to get close enough to plant a grenade, but the thing simply grabbed him up in its huge fist and collapsed his ribcage, casting him away like a broken doll.

‘Panic gripped me. I had no idea how to kill it. To me it seemed as if it was already dead, a nightmare made flesh.

‘I knew I had no choice. I rushed forward, raising my lasrifle and squeezing off shot after shot, thinking that perhaps if I could somehow separate its head from its shoulders, I might be able to stop it.

‘I screamed in rage as I ploughed through the corpses of the fallen, firing over and over, and to my amazement I saw that it was working. The Plague Marine staggered back, away from me, and I pressed on, relentless. Its throat – the flesh already corroded by its own acidic bile – burst in a splatter of yellow pus and its head yawned backwards, twisting on top of its damaged spine. I stood, watching in awe, as the creature wobbled unsteadily on its feet for a moment, before toppling forward in a heap.

‘A stream of foul-smelling gas hissed from the stump of its neck.

‘It was only then that I realised the creature’s foul blade was jutting out of my belly, and I pulled it free, screaming in agony, and slumped to the ground, defeated.

‘This is how I was when you found me.’

‘You have honoured yourself and those of your kin who gave their lives for the Emperor,’ said Koryn. ‘You die knowing you have done your duty. That is the greatest of honours.’

The lumbering, wheezing sounds from behind him were growing closer now, and Sergei tightened his grip on his lasrifle. The Raven Guard, however, seemed entirely unperturbed by the approaching monstrosity, content to remain standing with his back to the battlefield. He must have represented a clear target, directly in its line of sight. He was taking a hell of a chance – and for what reason? Sergei could not be sure. The ways of the Adeptus Astartes were a mystery to him, utterly unfathomable.

He found himself straining to catch a glimpse of the thing, but didn’t have the strength to haul himself up to get a better view, and Koryn almost entirely blocked his line of sight. It didn’t seem as if he were planning to move any time soon.

‘Have you fought them before?’ asked Sergei.

His teeth had begun to chatter with the cold. He didn’t know if that was the weather, or the loss of blood. He suspected the latter.

Koryn nodded.

‘On many occasions I have sent their foul kind to their deaths.’ Koryn’s voice was level, betraying no emotion.

The tension was excruciating now and Sergei wanted to scream at the Space Marine to turn around. He was convinced that the thing would be

upon them at any moment; that it would unleash some horrific barrage from its weapons and that Koryn would be incinerated where he stood. Had he not realised? Did he not know it was there?

He squeezed his eyes shut, drawing a deep breath in preparation for the coming onslaught. There was nothing he could do but add his fire to the battle, to squeeze off as many shots as possible before it was upon them. Assuming, of course, that Koryn even intended to put up a fight.

He opened his eyes to see the Space Marine had gone. He hadn't even heard him move. For a moment, panicked, he thought he'd abandoned him, left him to face the monstrosity alone, but then he realised he had simply moved, stepping to one side to afford them both a better view.

The enemy machine was near the top of the steps now, and as Sergei watched, it lumbered forward, each footstep causing the ground beneath him to shudder. It was tall – taller even than Koryn – and was, without doubt, the most terrifying thing he had ever seen. His heart raced in his chest, hammering against his ribcage, and he felt warm blood oozing out through the rent in his belly. He knew he did not have long left to live, one way or another.

The creature might once have been a Space Marine such as Koryn, encased in the thick armour plating of a Dreadnought, but now it was some sort of nightmare monster dragged from the very depths of the warp itself. The green plasteel of its casing had twisted and parted, fusing with the dead, pustulant flesh beneath, so that the thing inside had become one with the machine that once housed it. The exposed skin rippled and quivered as he watched, as if fist-sized creatures shifted nervously beneath the surface, trying desperately to break free.

The creature's face sat in a pit of this rippling flesh-armour, surrounded by a haze of putrid gas and buzzing flies. The flesh here had been almost entirely flayed from the skull, and the eye sockets were hollow and empty: staring, unforgiving, but – somehow – still seeing. The skeletal jaw worked constantly up and down; as if the thing were attempting to intone some foul litany as it walked, or else laugh insanely and silently at the thought of what it might inflict upon its prey.

One arm had morphed into an immense, double-barrelled flamer that spat yellow fire, the other had split and altered, separating into three distinct tentacles that writhed and twisted like mechanised snakes,

dripping with ichor. Once the limb had terminated in a bulky power fist, and now each of the tentacles had claimed a fragment of this broken weapon, each end weighted with a misshapen lump of green plasteel. A blow from any one of them, Sergei knew, would be enough to crush a human body to pulp.

Most disturbing of all, the immense, bloated body of the creature was covered in mouths. Fanged orifices of all shapes and sizes puckered arms, legs and torso alike. Dripping tongues lolled hungrily from within, tasting the air. There must have been dozens of them, snapping in anticipation.

The Helbrute stormed forwards, flicking out its tentacles and demolishing one of the stone pillars that marked the narrow entrance to the acropolis. Broken stone clattered to the ground in a spray of dust and chippings as the creature pushed on, smashing its way through the too-small opening. The walls parted like water in its wake. It bellowed again, although the voice seemed not to emanate from the skeletal mouth but from its myriad grotesque counterparts.

Flames gushed from the end of its weapon, under-lighting its harrowing face. Sergei raised his lasrifle, trying to draw a bead on its head. He was shaking so violently now that he couldn't be sure he'd even manage to hit the thing at all. He slowly depressed the trigger, but at the last moment felt the barrel of the rifle being forced down so that the shot went wide, discharging harmlessly into the wall. He hadn't even managed to get the thing's attention, so intent it was upon closing the gap between itself and Koryn.

He glanced up to see Koryn stooping over him. The Space Marine shook his head.

'Watch.'

Sergei was about to protest, to ask him what good watching would do, when Koryn suddenly released his grip on his weapon and stepped away, moving toward the oncoming Helbrute. It was standing now in the dead centre of the ruined structure, its mechanical feet crushing the remains of his fallen comrades, and it was spoiling for a fight. It could have doused them both in flames in a matter of moments, but something – vanity, he suspected, or perhaps simple arrogance – had caused it to hesitate. It seemed to beckon Koryn forward, urging him on as if willing him to close the gap between them and make good his attack. It wanted to meet him in

hand-to-hand combat, to test its mettle against a captain of the Raven Guard.

Koryn raised his lightning talons, blue electrical light crackling across their surface. He lowered himself into a crouch, coiling as if to spring...

‘No!’ Sergei called out, his body wracking with pain. He knew even Koryn did not stand a chance against the thing alone. He could do little to assist with his lasrifle and his wavering sight. He was about to watch him die.

But then, almost as soon as the words had passed his lips, he sensed movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head fractionally to see the shadows were moving. All around the acropolis, ebon-clad figures were peeling away from the walls. He glanced from side to side. They were coming from all directions. He counted them – at least nine, maybe more, entirely encircling the creature that now stood in their midst. A circle of black death.

Sergei gasped. They must have been there all along, ever since Koryn first arrived. He hadn’t noticed them as they’d fanned out around the inside of the ruins, taking up their positions, ready for the attack: an entire squad of Raven Guard, their black, beaked helmets shining in the weak sunlight, bleached bird skull totems dangling from chains around their belts.

It was an ambush. Koryn had lured the Helbrute into the ruins. He had shown himself in order to draw it closer, close enough for his brothers to ensnare it in their trap. That was why he had spoken with him. That was why he had left himself exposed in such a way. He’d counted on the arrogance of the creature, anticipated its desire to face him in hand-to-hand combat.

The sound of their voices would have alerted the enemy to their presence. Sergei had been nothing but bait.

He gave a wet, spluttering laugh as he watched the circle of Space Marines close in on their prey.

The Helbrute screeched, twisting and turning, its tentacles whipping out in desperate frenzy as the black-armoured warriors danced around it, weapons barking. It was beautiful to watch – almost balletic – as the Raven Guard systematically showered the creature with bolt-rounds, whilst their captain kept it pinned in position with his flashing, sweeping

talons. He saw a severed tentacle spin away, wriggling for a moment on the dusty ground nearby, before falling still. He saw the tiny mouths that encrusted the creature scream in unison as its belly was breached by rounds, spilling its foul, semi-organic innards across the flagstones. He saw Koryn step forward and wrench the thing's head free with a single flick of his wrist, sending it spinning away into the corner of the ruins where it landed with a hollow thud.

The Helbrute's flamer issued a final spurt of burning promethium, and then it twisted half around, raised one leg as if to make a step, and pitched forward onto the flagstones. Its remaining tentacles gave two, twitching spasms, its left leg clawed at the ground, and then, with a hissing sigh, it was dead.

For a moment, everything was still. There was no cry of victory from the Space Marines; they simply looked on in silence as one of them stepped forward and doused the fallen monster with his flamer. The hungry conflagration took hold almost instantly, and within seconds the downed Helbrute had been reduced to a smoking, crackling pyre.

Sergei could feel the wall of heat from almost ten metres away, and the stench of burning meat was acrid in the back of his throat. He coughed, and more blood spilled from the corner of his lips.

He glanced down at the gash in his belly, and when he looked up again, all but one of the black-armoured figures had gone. Only Koryn remained, silhouetted against the guttering flames.

'Great deeds,' Sergei whispered, his voice barely audible. He was tired. So very tired. The lasrifle had slipped from his grasp. 'Great deeds.'

He sensed the towering Space Marine standing over him and, with enormous effort, raised his head to look up at his faceplate.

'Die well, soldier,' said Koryn. For the first time, his voice seemed imbued with a sense of sorrow. 'I will remember your tale.'

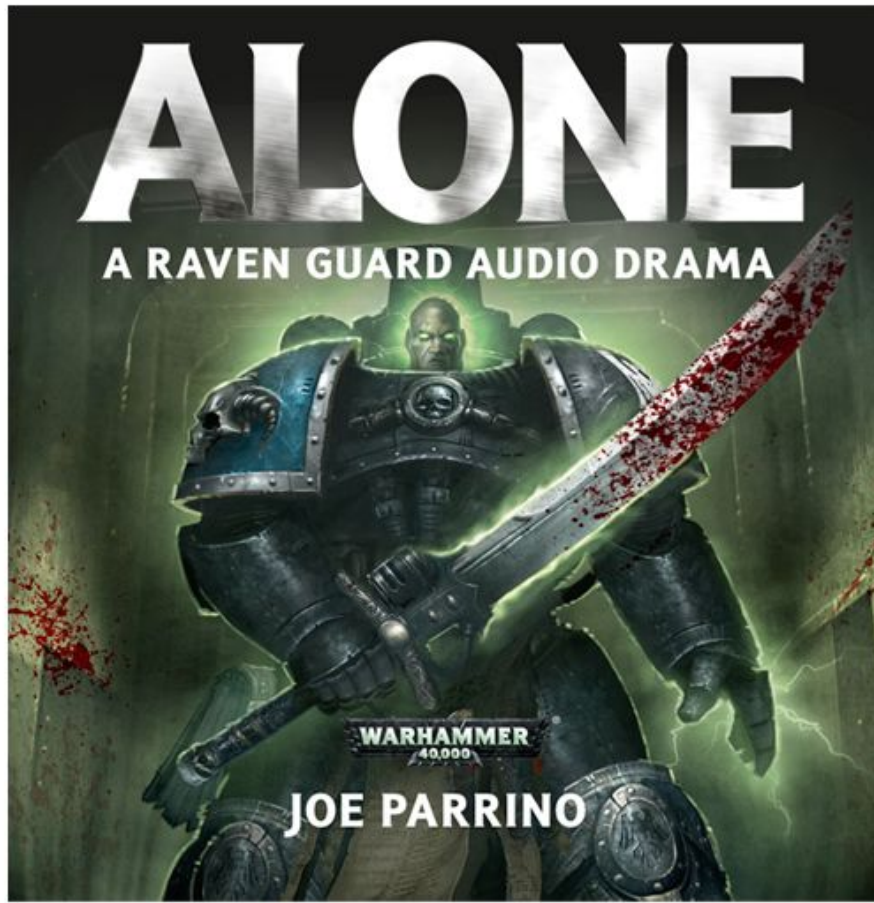
And then he was gone, whisked away into the storm of the battle, and all that was left was the eerie silence of the ruined acropolis, the crackle of the fire and the distant thunder of bolt-rounds.

Sergei closed his eyes, and sighed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Mann is an author and editor based in the East Midlands. For Black Library, he is best known for his stories featuring the Raven Guard, which include the audio dramas *Helion Rain* and *Labyrinth of Sorrows*, the novella *The Unkindness of Ravens*, plus a number of short stories.

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