

# The Counsel of a Brother

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### B1C02 — The Counsel of a Brother

The vow still tasted of ash in his soul. He replayed the words he had offered to the bruised purple sky, testing their weight. They felt less like a choice and more like a surrender to an inevitable gravity, a final letting go. For a single, fleeting moment, there had been peace in it. Now, there was only Serephis.

The air was thin, tasting of ozone and a regret so keen it felt like his own. The sky seemed to press down, a heavy blanket smothering the light. Under his boots, the plains of shattered obsidian and glass-sand ground together with a sound like whispering teeth, a constant, abrasive murmur that frayed the edges of his thoughts. He adjusted his grip on his sword hilt, a familiar gesture that offered a now-useless comfort. His gaze swept the horizon, not for threats, but for a sign—any sign—that this path was real and not just the final stage of madness.

His shoulders ached with the phantom weight of his command, a burden he had carried for millennia. But a cold certainty had settled in his gut, an anchor in the storm of his unraveling faith. This was the way. It had to be.

The discordant noise of the desert, a symphony of grinding chaos, was suddenly pierced by a single, perfect note. It was an alien sound, a chord of pure harmony that hurt the air, structuring the chaos in a way Serephis abhorred.

His first thought was that it was a new trick, a siren's call from the whispering sands designed to lead him into a deeper madness. But this sound held no malice. It had structure, a mathematical purity that this place could not create, only suffer. He froze mid-stride, head tilting as the resonant chord began to build, a clean and rising tone that seemed to physically push back the desert's grating hum.

The arrhythmic pulsing of the distant, alien stars seemed to stutter, their chaotic rhythm faltering. The grinding of the sand lessened, as if in deference. His hand instinctively went to the conceptual wound in his chest, the cold void that had started all this. It felt agitated by the pure note, a dull ache sharpening into a needle of alarm mixed with an almost forgotten sense of homesickness. What could possibly make such a sound here?

He knew before he saw. He recognized the resonance not as a person, but as a fundamental principle of Heaven, a law of existence given form. Ambient light,

which in Serephis was a scattered and broken thing, began to gather. It wove itself into threads of shimmering blue, coalescing into a column of impossible order.

The air grew warmer, the scent of ozone and regret replaced by the clean smell of rain on stone after a long drought. The discordant hum of Serephis was physically shoved back, creating a pocket of stillness and silence around the forming shape. Miguel felt a pang of guilt so sharp it was like a blade to the ribs, the feeling of a child caught breaking a sacred law.

His stance shifted from the wary posture of a lone traveler to the rigid form of a soldier reporting to a superior. He forced his hand away from his chest, his fingers curling into a fist at his side. The pillar of blue light solidified, resolving into the form of his brother, Gabriel.

Awe warred with dread in his heart. The love he felt for his brother was a physical ache, a warmth that spread through his weary limbs, but his stomach clenched with the certainty of the coming confrontation.

Gabriel did not speak. He simply stood, a small island of stability in the chaotic twilight, his blue-tinged glow casting a steady, gentle light. For a moment, Miguel was not the Commander, not the transgressor, not the haunted wanderer. He was just Miguel, and this was Gabriel, his brother, his oldest friend. The urge to confess everything—the wound, the doubt, the vow—was a tide threatening to pull him under, a desperate need for the absolution only a brother's love could offer.

Gabriel's gaze, the color of deep space, swept over Miguel's worn form, taking in the dust on his armor and the new, hard lines around his eyes. The sorrow in that gaze was more potent than any accusation. Miguel found he could not meet it. He looked away, focusing on a distant, pulsing star, a pinprick of chaos in the bruised sky. Shame washed over him, hot and heavy. Why did his brother's love feel more damning than any formal judgment from the Council?

"They are worried for you, brother," Gabriel said at last. His voice was not a sound but a chord, each word a perfect harmony that landed with the weight of a judicial sentence. The air grew thick, hard to breathe. "The Council fears your mind has been touched. That this quest of yours is a deception woven by the Enemy to draw you away from the front."

Miguel heard the capital letters in his brother's voice—Council, Host, Order. Words that had once formed the bedrock of his soul now felt like the bars of a cage. Gabriel's hands were held loosely at his sides, but his fingers were curled slightly, a tell of deep tension he only ever showed around Miguel. He spoke of the Council's fears, but he omitted Uriel's specific, venomous accusations. It was a small mercy, but it felt like a twisting knife.

“They do not understand,” Miguel said, his own voice sounding rough and broken against his brother’s perfect tone.

“Then make me understand,” Gabriel pleaded, taking a half-step closer. “Help me.”

A cold knot of anger and defensiveness formed in Miguel’s gut. How could they judge what they could not feel? How could they speak of deception when this wound was the most real thing he had ever known?

As if in answer, the wound in his chest pulsed. It was a sharp, cold throb, a counter-argument spoken in a language only he understood. It was a truth that resonated in his very bones, saying, *They are wrong. Their world is the illusion. This is what is real.*

He flinched, a hand flying to his chest as if he’d been struck. His breath hitched. The air around him grew colder, and the glass-sand at his feet seemed to darken as his shadow drank the blue light his brother cast. The thrumming in his bones became a low, audible hum that vibrated in the still air.

He looked at Gabriel, his expression shifting from defensive anger to raw, undeniable pain. The agony was a surge of validation. The pain was his proof. Why couldn’t Gabriel see that?

Gabriel’s expression softened with sorrow. “The war goes poorly, Miguel. The breach at the Seraphiel Overlook is wider than we feared. The Seventh Legion was broken. Camael holds the line, but he cannot hold it forever.”

The blue light around Gabriel seemed to flicker, and for a moment, Miguel saw images of battle within its depths—a burning bastion, a shattered shield held by a dying angel, the disciplined retreat of a legion under heavy fire. The faint, imagined scent of celestial fire momentarily tainted the desert air.

Gabriel’s voice lost its perfect harmony, taking on a rougher, more urgent edge. He spoke of tactical designations and legion numbers, of casualty reports and dwindling reserves. He was no longer speaking to Miguel the brother, but to Miguel the General.

A sickening lurch of duty pulled at him, a force almost as strong as the wound. He could visualize the map, the retreating lines, the failing defenses. He felt a sharp pang of responsibility, a general’s guilt for soldiers lost under a different, lesser command. Had he doomed them all for a ghost?

“Do you remember the victory at the Obsidian Gates?” Gabriel asked, his voice softening again, trying to find a different path back to him. “After the final charge, when the field was ours, you and I stood on the ramparts and watched the twin suns rise. You said that no victory was worth the cost, but no cost was too great for peace.”

The memory was so clear it was painful. The taste of victory, the shared look of profound relief with Gabriel, the warmth of the suns on his face. It felt like a lifetime ago, a memory of a different person, an angel so certain and whole. The memory seemed to warm the air between them, a small pocket of shared history in the cold, alien desert. A faint, sad smile touched Gabriel's lips. Miguel looked away, unable to meet the memory reflected in his brother's eyes. Who was that angel, so unbroken?

"That is not what this is," Miguel said, his voice strained. He gestured vaguely at the wound in his chest, his hands shaping a void in the air. "This is... a hollowness. An echo. There is a missing note in the song of my soul, Gabriel. I have to find it."

He searched for the words, but they all sounded like poetry, like madness. There was no language for this feeling, no way to explain a truth that existed outside of logic and law. As he spoke, the wind of Serephis seemed to mock him, twisting his words into a meaningless hiss. The pulse in his chest throbbed, a silent, impatient rhythm against his ribs. He felt a surge of desperate frustration, like a man trying to describe color to one born blind. Why wouldn't he understand?

Gabriel's sorrowful expression deepened into something closer to fear. The blue light around him intensified as he focused his senses, probing Miguel's aura. Miguel felt the gentle, analytical touch of his brother's perception, a familiar sensation from a thousand shared meditations. But then, the probe reached the wound.

It recoiled. Gabriel's light pulled back as if it had touched a patch of absolute cold, a hole in the very fabric of being. Miguel saw his brother's hand clench into a fist, a subtle, defensive gesture. *This is not him*, he could almost hear Gabriel think. *Something has hollowed him out. The light is there, but the song is gone.*

A cold wave of terror washed through Miguel. He knew in that moment, in the recoil of his brother's very essence, that he had already lost this argument.

Gabriel's carefully constructed composure finally broke. He abandoned all pretense of duty, all mention of the Council. His light softened, losing its formal intensity and becoming a gentle, pleading glow. The air grew thick with unspoken love and the bitter taste of impending loss.

"Forget the Council," Gabriel whispered, his voice no longer a perfect chord but a single, vulnerable note. He reached out a hand, not to command, but to implore. "Forget the war. Just... come home, Miguel. Please, brother. Come home."

The words were a physical blow. *Come home*. The phrase was a key to a lock he no longer possessed. The concept of "home" felt alien, a memory from a life that was no longer his. His carefully constructed walls crumbled. Tears he could not shed

burned behind his eyes. How could he choose this cold, demanding wound over this love, this perfect, unconditional love?

The choice was not his to make.

As if sensing his wavering resolve, the wound answered. A deep, resonant thrum emanated from his chest, a bass note so powerful it made the glass-sand at his feet vibrate. It silenced the wind. It silenced Gabriel's plea. It silenced the war in his own soul.

There was no argument. There was no choice. This was a law of his new nature. The pulse was not a request; it was a fact.

His head snapped up, his eyes losing their conflict, their pain, their love. They became clear, focused, and distant. He lowered his own hand from his chest, the internal battle over. A moment of absolute, cold clarity descended upon him. The pain of the choice vanished, replaced by the certainty of the path.

He chose his words carefully, honing them to a sharp edge, making them a clean cut. He knew this would hurt Gabriel more than any blade, and the knowledge was a fresh wound in what was left of his heart. He finally met his brother's gaze, his own eyes steady and unreadable.

"I cannot," he said. The simple words carried the weight of a final verdict.

The air between them grew impossibly cold. The small island of warmth and order Gabriel had created collapsed instantly. Miguel watched the light drain from his brother's face, the vibrant blue dimming to a pale, heartbroken silver. He had broken the most perfect thing he had ever known, and the victory felt like a profound and irreversible loss.

Gabriel slowly lowered his outstretched hand. He gave a single, almost imperceptible nod of defeat. For just a moment, his perfect posture sagged, the weight of his failure pressing down on him. The chaotic sounds of Serephis, the grinding and the whispering, began to creep back in at the edges of their silence.

"The Council will not understand this," Gabriel said, his voice now flat, all its harmony gone. "They will see it as a betrayal. I cannot protect you from this, Miguel." He heard the unspoken part of the warning: *I cannot protect you from them*. He was truly on his own.

Gabriel's last look was not one of anger, but of pity. He turned, and without another word, his form unraveled, the threads of blue light dissolving back into the chaotic twilight. The departure was quicker, less gentle than his arrival.

The oppressive heat and the grinding noise of Serephis rushed back in, twice as loud, twice as heavy as before. A chilling sense of finality settled over Miguel. The bridge back to his old life, to his home, to his brother, had just been burned.

The desert felt emptier now, the bruised sky darker. The only light was the faint, arrhythmic pulse of the alien stars. The only sound was the grinding sand and the insistent thrum in his soul. The memory of Gabriel's sorrow was a new burden, heavier than his armor, heavier than his sword. He had to find the answer to this wound, if only to prove that this sacrifice, this terrible, necessary cruelty, was not in vain.

He took a deep, ragged breath. He squared his shoulders, adjusting to the new weight of his solitude. Then, turning his back on the place where his brother had stood, he took a single, deliberate step forward into the gathering dark.