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A CRAFTWORLD AELDARI SHORT STORY

PATH OF GRIEF

ADRIAN SOUTHIN



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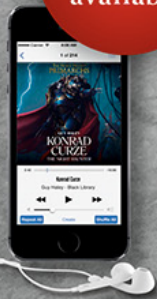
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PATH OF GRIEF

by Adrian Southin

The singing spear set before Itheíul had belonged to her brother, Arsan. When her fingers drew near the haft, she could still feel the wisps of his soul imprint.

She hesitated, and pulled back her hand. Other imprints lingered, those who had wielded the weapon in the name of the serpent of Saim-Hann before Arsan. So too could she sense those the spear had brought death upon. Some, by her brother's hand, she had witnessed personally: the choirmaster of the Glittering Host, the crude ork engineers of Galthakka, the Imperial commander on Perinese. Many more she had not. The countless deaths the weapon had delivered reverberated through its wraithbone surface.

The Path of Grief does not suit you.

The voice echoed, grounded not in the chamber, but both near and impossibly distant, like a song carried over a still lake.

Itheíul knelt alone in the small, oval chamber. The chill of the floor bit through her ash-grey robe, a simple garment devoid of ornamentation. Other than the spear and the deep-green spirit stone placed in front of her, the chamber was bare. A taper of incense suffused the room with the earthy scents of far-off maiden worlds; the thin line of smoke gently twisted about the dark walls to stretch to some unseen height. Only the soft luminescence from the infinity circuit core beyond an archway lit the room. The wraithbone in the Halls of Whispered Lament was charged. It resonated with the energy of millions of whispering aeldari souls. The voices wove into an indecipherable and unpredictable melody, notes

balanced on the edge of recognition.

Hunter. Warrior. Artisan. These are what you were known to be. Always in motion. The psychic presence seemed to circle Itheiul, like a hawk judging its prey. Now you are caught in stasis, adrift in the void. You mourn that which you do nothing to prevent. To what end?

Itheiul said nothing. She brought her thumbs and forefingers together into a triangle on her lap, and began to mentally recite the Elegies of Caoinath the Lost. It was not uncommon for the spirits of seers to reach out to those on the Path. Those formerly on the Path of the Witch retained greater consciousness in the infinity circuit and, as in life, they sought to advise and guide, especially when unsolicited. Yet the Mourners were cautioned against prolonged communions. It was unsafe for the living to engage with the dead, lest they be drawn too far from the material world.

When did you last leave these halls? The question was rhetorical, an attempt to goad her to lower her guard. *Even the Aspect Warriors leave their shrine and remove their masks between battles.*

For all its dangers, the Path of Grief was a necessary one. The anguish of a loved one's death could overcome any aeldari, and such unchecked emotion presented an ever greater risk. Conducting funerary rites was a small facet of the Path. The Mourners acted as a conduit for the anguish of the entire craftworld. Though loss would still keen in the hearts of those close to the fallen, the burden borne by the disciples allowed the greater whole to carry on.

Why does the spear bring you such trepidation? The spirit pressed nearer.

‘It is but a weapon. Only the enemies of Saim-Hann need fear it,’ Itheiul spoke aloud, although she knew there was no need. Thoughts and emotions were as tangible to the spirit as the walls of the chamber were to her. Her voice was soft, uncertain, the words the first she had spoken in several cycles.

Yet you refuse to even touch it.

Itheiul craned her neck upwards to stare into the dark expanse. ‘What right do I have? It belongs in the hands of a seer.’ For a brief moment she thought she saw a glimmer of golden flame far above her, though she knew there was no source for the light.

Why do you not claim such a destiny? Take the mantle upon yourself, and lead the craftworld through these troubled times.

The light beyond the chamber dimmed, the voices hushed as their attention turned elsewhere. Perhaps a seer conclave had come to seek the circuit's counsel, or to reanimate a host of wraith constructs from the spirit stones of the craftworld's fallen warriors, a practice that had become disturbingly more frequent. The calls for Saim-Hann's aid grew with each passing cycle, and the Wild Host was stretched thin. But the presence's attention on Itheiul did not waver.

'Is that to be my fate, then?' Itheiul eyed the tip of the spear. A soft, emerald light played at the edge of the blade. 'To direct our kin to further death? To expend their lives against a galaxy that has already doomed our people?'

We fight so there may yet be those who live. There was a time when such fervour burned in your every step. The presence felt incredibly close now, as if hovering right behind Itheiul's ear. No longer echoing, the words stilled in the air. *What of Deniadol?*

Deniadol. The Exodite world, once a verdant paradise of clear lakes and coniferous forests, was being consumed. Bilious air stung the skin. Oceans acidified and choked with dead marine life. Soil soured and trees withered. If viewed from orbit, the planet would appear as if its very colours were being siphoned away. With the skin peeled back, the tyranids had begun to feast on the marrow of Deniadol.

The Exodites had fought fiercely for their world, but the swarms quickly devoured any pockets of resistance. Raiding parties were ambushed in their own hunting grounds. Monstrosities of incomprehensible size dwarfed the megadon dragons. The Exodites' lasblasters, despite their deceptive sophistication, could not fire fast enough to slow the ravenous swarm.

When the Serpent Hosts of Saim-Hann arrived, two days after the tyranids had breached the atmosphere, little of Deniadol remained to be saved. The undertaking was vast. The craftworld's fleet orchestrated hit-and-run raids targeting spores swollen with tyranid reinforcements and drawing the hive's attention before darting away. Guardian squads and support batteries established defensive cordons around the shrinking patch of aeldari territory, while scribes administered thousands of refugees flooding to the planet's webway gate.

The Wild Rider clans rallied in a clearing before the gate. Except for the scouts and Guardians watching the perimeter, and the Aspect Warriors who held no stake in clan politics, the entire host was ringed around two circling aeldari warriors. Both were stripped to their waists and carried simple glaives. Virulent green warpaint daubed their flesh in lieu of the tyrannid's corrosive ichor. Members of clans Tyllach and Morléath whooped and cheered their champions on. Those of other clans remained taciturn, their champions already bested. Small clusters of the Exodites had paused in their migration to watch the duel, the scaled hides draped from their armour marking them as the riders of their own kind. Most of the refugees paid no heed.

‘This display is ridiculous,’ Arsan said.

‘Why? Do you believe you should be out there?’ Itheíul glanced towards her brother.

Arsan exhaled sharply and ground the butt of his singing spear into the wilting grass. The greying strands peeled away in clumps, their roots brittle. Geometric wraithbone intersected the seer's deep-crimson robes to form runes, which mounted a green waystone. The fur of a lycabeast covered his shoulders. Unlike many of the warriors, who let the weak wind play across their hair, Arsan kept his white helmet donned, the featureless black faceplate doing little to mask his irritation.

The warlock held his chest high. Though he now walked the Path of the Seer, he would always bear the proud posture of his time among the headstrong lancers of the Shrine of the Impaling Star. Itheíul had intended to join her brother at the shrine, but the Impaling Star exarch thought their closeness a liability and refused her. She instead found guidance at the Piercing Gale Shrine of Shining Spears. The siblings spoke little of their respective experiences on the Warrior's Path.

The Morléath champion, Iylabir, abruptly ceased circling and darted forward with a flurry of blows. Anasariel of Tyllach stepped back and replied with a low sweep that was easily turned aside, before drawing up the momentum of the redirect to strike with the pommel of his glaive.

‘Be patient, Arsan. Anasariel will not lose us the honour of first strike.’

‘There is no honour in bickering over the right to slay the fiend.’ Arsan turned away from the duel and directed his attention to the polluted horizon. ‘Honour would be to end this immediately and strike before

further ground is lost. He wastes precious time.'

Itheiul could understand her brother's ill ease. The Saim-Hann fleet maintained orbital superiority over the gate for now, but the shadows of the bio-ships pressed closer. After the craftworld forces cleared out the initial predators, the swarm had been spawning fresh numbers to reply with overwhelming force. All of the aeldari could feel the pressure of the tyranids' warp shadow mounting in their minds. For those who had attuned their psychic potential, like Arsan, that pressure must have been agony.

'This is more than pride at work.' Itheiul motioned to the assembled host. 'See the might before us? With each blow they stoke the fires burning in each of us. Are we not drawn into a unity of purpose?'

Arsan did not contest the point further, but Itheiul knew her brother's frustration was not assuaged. The duel wore on, punctuated by the rhythmic crack of the whirling glaives meeting one another. The champions' blows were savage, desperate even, yet lacked none of the grace of their people. An outsider might have mistaken the contest for a ritual dance, had neither warrior been out for the other's blood. Sweat smudged their warpaint, splattering drops of green with each block and riposte.

In truth, the duel's prize was a bittersweet honour. While the other clans would remain behind to defend the webway gate, the riders of the champion's clan would strike out to draw the swarm into traps and hunt the synapse creatures that bound the swarm to the hive's will. The Serpent Host knew there could be no triumph on the battlefield. The clan would be riding into the very maw itself. But their sacrifice, should the gambit succeed, would buy the rest of the eldar time to flee the maiden world. The craftworld's seers had weighed the fates carefully and deemed this course the least costly.

Anasariel's misstep was slight, his footwork off by the width of a blade's edge, but enough for his opponent to press the advantage. Iylabir drove the Tyllach champion to the edge of the ring and knocked his weapon wide. Iylabir lunged forward, and a cheer went up amongst his kin. The cries were cut short – Anasariel held his glaive to his rival's throat. A bead of hot blood ran the edge of blade. The flat of Iylabir's weapon was pressed to Anasariel's side, the wraithbone wetted only by green warpaint.

A clever ploy, but a risky one. In Iylabir's eagerness to capitalise on his

opponent's mistake, he had failed to notice that each step backwards had been carefully executed to draw him in. Anasariel had never lost control. A sudden shift on the balls of his feet was enough to avoid the lunge and spin his glaive around and upwards. Had he been any less precise, or misjudged his foe's next steps, however, the blow would have impaled him.

The champion's kin erupted, Itheíul's voice among them. The exultation was brief, however. The Horn of the Hunt's bass call cut through clamour and the clan delayed no further.

The Wild Riders of Tyllach prepared for war.

Where is that fire, Itheíul? The voice brought Itheíul out of the memory-trance. The spirit had sorted through her memories of the planet with ease, forcing her to relive experiences she had tried to lock away. The acidic wind lingered with her for a moment before she took in the dry air of the chamber. She focused on the tranquil incense and waited for her heartbeat to return to resting before she replied.

'Fervour fuelled by foolishness.' Itheíul opened her eyes slowly. 'I was ignorant then of the Great Devourer's true horror.'

Yet the foe was not invulnerable. Was glory not seized that day?

'Glory and death. Honour and loss. Bravado begets tragedy. We faced but a claw of the enemy and still could not save that world.'

Itheíul stood and began a slow circuit of the room. She ran her fingers over shallow runes inscribed into the walls. Her sight had become accustomed to the gloom of the halls, and the darkness gave her no trouble in reading the engravings. They told of gods and aeldari long passed into myth: the woes of the War in Heaven and the fall of the House of Eldanesh; the severing of the hand of Morai-Heg, the Crone Goddess of Fate; the verses of the *Elthir Corannir Rhiantha*, telling of the maiden whose tears for the fallen warriors of Rhidhol became starlight. Lives of the craftworld's fallen interwove the myths, crafting allusions and informing the recountings. Some were heroes dating back to the Fall, others more recent. She paused before reaching the epitaphs carved by her own hand.

'A tendril of a splinter killed Deniadol.' Itheíul winced as more memories of the planet's death broke through the barriers of her

consciousness. Images of a ceaseless sea of ravenous eyes and lipless maws lashed her mind. ‘The whole of the beast will drown the galaxy.’

The Wild Host will not face doom meekly.

‘What hope do we have against such ceaseless terrors while our people dwindle?’

Fighting for survival has ever been the way of Saim-Hann, even in our days of exodus before the Fall. Hope has not seen us through. Bravery in the face of certain death, against foes numerous enough to blot out the stars and hungering for our blood, is how the craftworld lives on.

The Wild Riders crossed the orbitally cleansed badlands between the gate and the renewed tyranid assault in moments. Hundreds of Tyllach jetbikes swept over the craters and canyons rent into the earth by the bombardments. Pennants bearing the clan rune snapped in the wind from the rear of the sleek, dart-like craft. Vyper squadrons were interspersed amongst the smaller bikes, followed by the more heavily armed Engines of Vault. Had there been anything left alive on the scorched earth below to witness the charge, the clan would have appeared as a bloody meteor shower burning across the sky.

When the horizon before them began to crawl and writhe, the host splintered into smaller kinbands, each striking out in carefully determined directions leagues apart. Potent as the craftworld’s augurs were, against the shadow of the tyranids none could divine where the tyrant would strike, so the net was cast wide. The Tyllach chieftain, Cainasairre, and his closest kin struck out towards a grouping of the largest creatures, where the shadow was thickest, for the honour of the kill was his above all others.

Itheiul rode to the right of Arsan, who led the arrowhead of their kinband. Their cousins completed their squad: Sabareth, on Itheiul’s right, whose jetbike mounted a shuriken cannon, and the ever-competing brothers Múrien and Seoladh on the opposite wing of the formation. The cousins had ridden to battle dozens of times together, their instincts honed as one.

The squad streaked towards the front lines of the tyranids. The wriggling mass resolved into thousands of individual stampeding organisms. Itheiul fought an overwhelming urge to loose her shuriken catapults. The jetbike’s weapons were far out of range, and the barrels would run dry before they

could shred even a fraction of the small six-limbed things screening the assault.

And then, in a heartbeat, the windriders were above the horde. Itheiul's auditory inputs struggled to adjust to the deafening scraping of shell on shell, the squishing of cartilaginous flesh and claws chewing the dirt. The sensors dampened the cacophony. What remained was the dimmed sound of a nest of spiders scuttling over her helmet. The tyranids opened fire without breaking stride. Gobs of corrosive fluid and semi-sentient projectiles shot skyward. The aeldari remained above the short reach of the weapons, weaving easily through the wild streams of shot.

Itheiul spotted a pack of larger tyranids amidst the rolling crush of purple chitin. They loomed above the fodder, at least twice the size of the lesser beings. Spiked crests swept back from their foreheads. They levelled forearm-fused rifles at the jetbikes, and strains of lesser creatures snapped their gazes to the riders, synchronised to the attention of their overlords. With a thought, Itheiul marked the warrior-beasts with a rune of warning on her helmet display and relayed it to her kin.

The tyranids unleashed their salvo and sent the Wild Riders into an abrupt nosedive. The riders corkscrewed through the coordinated counter-fire, and loosed their underslung shuriken catapults with a thought. The monomolecular discs lacerated the warrior-beasts. Just before impact with the ground, the riders pulled up in a parabolic arc that would have incapacitated any pilot of a lesser race. The manoeuvre thrilled Itheiul's Saim-Hann heart, obscuring her terror with a glimmer of exhilaration.

Again and again the windriders sought out and harried the synapse beasts, and drove the tide into further rages. The swarm brought forth hulking creatures that swayed under the weight of massive cannons in response, better equipped to shoot down the speeding craft, and the riders withdrew further up the canyons. The tyranids hurtled on, too incensed to give up on their prey.

The squad angled back around in time to see plasma-blue detonations atomise the rocky terrain and shoot great plumes of dust into the thinning atmosphere. More explosions erupted over the badlands. The payloads, which the craftworld's wayward rangers had bored into the earth scant few hours ago, tore open deep sinkholes across the breadth of the swarm.

When the dust settled, however, the sight tightened the muscles of

Itheíul's chest. Múrien gasped and Sabareth cursed through the squad's communication link. The stampede of tyranids had come to a standstill before the precipice of the chasm. While hundreds of the smaller organisms had been caught in the blast or plummeted into the molten rock hundreds of measures below, the tide behind them had arrested the inertia of the advance in a single-minded reaction. Artillery creatures immediately began to blast at the adjacent terrain from further within the throng. With thundering cracks, the rocks fractured and started a landslide above the fissure. Hulking brutes smashed at the canyon walls like living battering rams. Debris rained from the impact sites until their carapaces snapped open, and their pulverised bodies were hauled to the chasm as further fill. Thousands of sets of eyes fixed upon the windriders, hungry and possessed of an unsettling patience.

The fluid coordination of the tyranids disturbed Itheíul, as did the suppression of survival instinct. The swarm had reacted so quickly, so effortlessly, it was as if the trap were little more than a shallow brook to be waded through.

Itheíul and her brother shared a glance. Such orchestration was beyond the ken of the lesser synapse beasts. The tyrant itself directed the hive's will here. But faced against the squirming masses of purple and bone white, they could slay millions before finding it.

Arsan withdrew a set of wraithbone runes from a pouch on his waist. He began to chant, barely a whisper at first, words that were ancient even by aeldari reckoning. One at a time, the runes floated up and orbited around his outstretched hand. Itheíul recognised the Arrow of Kurnous – the Seeking Shaft – and the inverse rune of concealment among them. Arsan's hand began to tremble, agitating the icons. Pain coloured his voice and his posture became rigid.

Agony lashed at the squad's minds and each of the windriders recoiled. Itheíul felt it most keenly, the empathic link between siblings far eclipsing the typical bonds of their people. The might of Asuryani psionics warred against the staggering curtain of the tyranids' hive mind. Arsan convulsed now, and the runes spun faster. The roars of an aeons-old sentience echoed in Itheíul's head and she too fought to stay upright. Seoladh hove closer and reached out a hand to steady the warlock. Itheíul gestured for her cousin to halt and shook her head, although she too had never seen such a

reaction. Breaking his concentration could be disastrous, and not just for the seer.

Itheíul looked to the swarm again. The steady erosion of the cliff faces had nearly filled the chasm. tyranids were already scrambling up the ruined wall of the canyon and climbing through the pit, while clouds of winged creatures hung overhead. The obstacle had been overcome in a handful of moments.

Arsan's chanting abruptly ceased and he slumped in his saddle. Harsh panting crackled in Itheíul's earpiece. The runes settled back to a slow circuit, all aligned towards a point far into the closing tyranid ranks.

'There.' Arsan forced himself back upright. He traced a line with a finger through the chitinous tide. A break in the sea of terrors resolved itself, like a trail through a dense jungle perceptible to only the most able hunter. 'Between the scales, the soft flesh of the abomination is revealed.'

Where before the barbed limbs and slavering mouths had bled together into a single mass, the tyrant now resolved before Itheíul's eyes. Illuminated by the faintest witch-light, the overfiend appeared in great clarity despite the distance. She felt it staring back, examining them. Just as Arsan's runes had divined the tyrant's position, the flare of psychic power was like a beacon to the hive mind.

'A precise thrust will see us to the mark,' Arsan said.

'Should we not wait for Chieftain Cainasairre?'

'I have alerted the seers among his retinue. They are en route, yet remain too far. We cannot allow it to move onwards. Our juncture is closing.' Leaving no more to discussion, Arsan readied his singing spear and descended over the ridge. 'Fly, my kin. Strike as the Saim!'

Itheíul brushed her thumb over the activation rune of her jetbike's handle, her force of will enough to surge her mount forward to keep up with Arsan. She drew her sabre to cut down a winged creature swooping to rip her from the saddle. A volley of shuriken from her trailing kin cut through the rest of the thing's flight.

Streams of living munitions sprayed skyward and rebounded from the carapace of the jetbikes, while the six-limbed infantry clawed over each other to leap at the aeldari. The Wild Riders swerved through the cresting waves of tyranids, too quick for the grasping fodder intent on wresting them from their saddles. The insectile creatures blurred as the riders

threaded their treacherous opening. Other beasts continued on, heedless of the kinband, driven onwards by the singular will of the hive mind.

A trio of warrior-beasts intercepted the riders' paths. The first leapt at Arsan, throwing open four scythed limbs. The warlock swept through blades, spear humming as it lanced through the alien's face. A second fiend loosed a volley after Arsan as he swept by. Scores of lesser creatures trailed its gaze and added their own fire to the fusillade. Itheiul swooped low and slashed at a gap between the chitin plates protecting the monster's spinal cord, sending it seizing and firing wildly into the horde at its feet. Wind ripped the ichor from her sabre in a wide emerald arc. The third spun and lashed out with a toothed whip, but the Wild Rider was long gone. A torrent from Sabareth's shuriken cannon silenced its frustrated shrieks.

A leviathan of three-foot-thick carapace and massive palpitating cannons waded through the tide into Itheiul's path, each gargantuan step shaking the earth. As uncaring of the infinitesimal riders as a herd animal was of a gnat, the Bio-Titan's mind was slaved only to the destruction of the heavy armaments defending the webway gate. Itheiul inverted her flight and manoeuvred through the tangle of its many bladed limbs. More winged tyranids detached themselves from the Titan's underbelly, but they met only the lingering vapours of afterburn as she regained altitude to pull alongside her kin.

A shaking bellow rose above the clamouring horde moments before a spurt of incandescent flame crashed into the vane of Sabareth's jetbike and enveloped her. Fire ravaged her body, yet the rider held on to her disintegrating mount. Sabareth unleashed a final bladestorm even as she spiralled into the press of limbs churning the lifeless dirt. She did not scream as she died, but the torment raked against the minds of her companions.

Itheiul wheeled her jetbike around and loosed her catapults at her cousin's killer. The shuriken tore chunks from the knuckle-walking brute's dorsal-mounted mortar. Its dripping four-piece jaw parted to bellow, but Itheiul's salvo struck a sac of swollen flesh and the tyranid erupted into a geyser of flame and bile.

Before Itheiul could descend after Sabareth, she felt Arsan press against her mind.

+There's no time, Itheíul, bury your grief. She is lost to us.+ The warlock accelerated his jetbike towards the tyrant. +The sacrifice will be avenged a thousandfold.+

Itheíul vowed that it would.

'We became powerless to the deaths around us. The fallen were many, and so few spirit stones recovered. Each battle diminishes Saim-Hann greatly.' Itheíul's fingertips lingered on the glyph of the Cosmic Serpent, which knew all secrets, past and future. Had it foreseen the doom of the aeldari, before She Who Thirsts gorged on its blood?

You speak as if it is the whole you mourn, not one.

'I grieve on behalf of the entire craftworld, not for myself.' Itheíul stepped to the centre of the chamber and returned to kneeling, the tops of her bare feet flat against the cold stone floor.

So claim many on the Path.

Itheíul ignored the insinuation. 'Each death burns like the dying of a star,' she said. 'It is blinding to look upon them all, and I cannot bear it.'

Does that not bring you rage? Does it not give you passion to prove the conspiring fates wrong, that the aeldari will survive?

She looked upon the singing spear again, which emitted a faint hum as she fixed her attention to it. The weapon was far taller than her, the broad blade of the spearhead itself nearly as long as her arm. Below the head were three short crossbars, an echo of *Suin Daellae*, the Wailing Doom, and of the grip of Khaine upon all aeldari. 'I have no such passion left to me,' she said at length.

It burns low, battered by the waves of Saim-Hann's losses, but it is not gone. Find the flames before they are extinguished and you are lost.

'I cannot.' Itheíul closed her eyes and tried to shut out the spirit, erecting barriers around her mind, but the presence passed through them easily.

So you will wallow away the ages while the craftworld crumbles around you? You flock to that which is safe, rather than confronting the turmoil inside you. The spirit's anger bled into reality, a sourceless flash of heat that washed away the chill of the chamber. Are their sacrifices so meaningless?

The Wild Riders punched through a knot of living tanks and fell upon the

tyrant.

The behemoth towered over its horde. Barbed carapace clad its gigantic frame, hard-as-bone flesh clinging to its skeletal underbody on the few unarmoured surfaces. A bladed horn extended from its throbbing forehead, the spike nearly as tall as Itheíul, and six toxin-spewing chimneys sprouted from its back. The predator fixed a pulsating cannon at its assailants, and raised a massive chitinous cleaver and a prehensile whip that twitched at the aeldari.

A cadre of six slab-carapaced brutes stamped forward on their knuckles, parting the onrush of infantry creatures. Massive plates protruded from their shoulders, like the shell of a beetle lifted for flight, to form a wall of chitin between the riders and their quarry.

Horror gripped Itheíul by the throat. The monstrosity was not simply hideous on a physical level, but its very presence was an assault on her mind. The tyrant had been waiting for them as they broke through the cover of the swarm, the riders never passing from its inconceivably wide awareness. And yet, the rest of the tide stampeded on, their objective fixed in their collective mind. That such a vast consciousness could exist, and to see it before her, was staggering.

Arsan loosed his shuriken catapults at the tyrant, breaking Itheíul's daze. The rest of the riders joined their fire to his. The bodyguards closed ranks around their master. Most of the shuriken ricocheted from their shells, but under the sustained bladestorm the razor discs began shredding away chunks of exoskeleton. Two of the guards crashed into the swarm, but if the others even perceived their deaths, they did not show it.

As the riders surged closer, the guards parted for the tyrant to reply with a torrent from its cannon. The projectiles grew rapidly in the air, blossoming barbed tendrils. Itheíul broke right, Seoladh and Múrien to the left, but Arsan continued straight for the synapse beast. The warlock jinked through the volley of grasping missiles and hurled his keening spear. With deceptive agility, one of the living shields reared up to intercept the attack. The blade punctured the brute's neck and lanced through its back. Arsan accelerated past the guard to catch the weapon's shaft even as it emerged through the tyrant's exoskeleton, and barrelled onwards.

Itheíul swept over the head of a bodyguard. She circled back and harried

it with bursts of shuriken. The thing stamped and gnashed glistening teeth at the rider as she repeated the tactic, its crushing claws always just out of reach. Her sabre raked across its carapace. With each pass, she drew the creature further from the tyrant's side, creating openings for Arsan to strike. Seoladh and Múrien worked in tandem to harass the other bodyguards, pulling and twisting them in all directions.

Arsan weaved about the tyrant, slashing and thrusting at exposed joints and tendons. It struggled to keep a bearing on the warlock; even the genetically engineered reflexes of the apex predator offered no match for the velocity of the skyrunner. Each swipe of its cleaver, powerful enough to sunder a grav-tank, fell short. Its pincer-tip tail snapped out at him as he wheeled around its back. Arsan deflected the blow with his weapon's haft, before skewering the beast's lash arm with the ringing spear tip.

The overfiend oozed ichor from a dozen places. The squirming ammunition sac of its cannon had been ruptured, and the beast was reduced to swinging the limb like a club. The toothed lash hung limp. The tyrant's posture had contracted and it slowed now, yet it kept the remaining sword defiantly levelled at the seer. Arsan flew beyond the synapse creature before looping around, spear braced under his shoulder. The warlock accelerated hard and the spear's song grew in volume. His foe readied its blade, but the ponderous swipe had little chance of catching the seer before he struck.

The tyrant suddenly leapt into the blow, fouling Arsan's aim and bashing the spear from his grip with its cranial blade. Its whip jerked back into motion to catch the warlock by the throat and rip him from his saddle. The jetbike spun past the beast and crashed into the swarm. Arsan clawed at the lash with one hand, but it coiled tighter to overcome the protection of the seer's rune armour. Lightning wreathed Arsan's empty hand and bounded towards his foe. The arcs dissipated as the tyrant roared, as if washed away by the sound waves. The screech raked at Itheíul's mind; it felt as if something was trying to claw out of her head. The tyrant drew back its blade again, angled to decapitate and charged with the cloying psychic energy of the hive.

Itheíul abandoned her opponent and raced towards her brother. She swung her sabre down at the lash. The blade broke upon the steel-like nerves of the cord, only half-severing the weapon. The torque of the writhing tore

the rest of the whip in half, yet still the scourge clung to Arsan, as if possessed of its own desire to throttle the seer. A crack punctuated the screech of Arsan's rune protection shattering. His neck broke as the whip contracted and its teeth pierced his throat.

Itheiul's entire being went numb.

The tyrant stood up to its full height and roared again. Gone was its cowed stance, its wounds little more than superficial. The monster barrelled towards Itheiul with staggering speed. The onslaught denied her room to manoeuvre the jetbike; to disengage would have left her dangerously exposed. It was all the windrider could do to steer her mount around its swipes, and she was now forced into desperate pitches and rolls. She fired her shuriken catapults where she could, but they rebounded from the abomination's hide.

Itheiul spotted her brother's singing spear beneath the trampling talons of the swarm and chanced a dive at it. She corkscrewed under a swipe of the tyrant's blade. With her flight still spinning, she reached for the haft. Her fingertips brushed over the wraithbone, just out of reach. And yet, perhaps through sheer will, the spear leapt to her grasp. The shock of the weapon's psychic presence reopened murderous impulses locked away after her departure from the aspect shrine. The rage of Khaine boiled away the ice in her veins as she righted herself.

The tyrant charged Itheiul again and she pulled up hard. She spiralled above it once, twice, before plummeting towards the beast. Itheiul commanded her jetbike to greater speeds. She stood and leaned forward in the saddle. Arsan's spear began the mournful peal it was named for. Or perhaps the screaming was Itheiul's. She did not know, for every piece of her soul was focused into the point of the weapon.

Itheiul vaulted from her jetbike a moment before the tyrant's blade cleaved through the armoured prow. The spearhead delivered the momentum of her descent into the narrow gap between the tyrant's misshapen skull and the shell encasing its back. The blade arrested as it bit into ropey nerve clusters, the impact jarring every joint in Itheiul's body. She spun around on the planted haft and onto her foe's back as the engines of her jetbike detonated.

The beast spasmed and threw back its head, trying to impale the Wild Rider with its cranial blade. Itheiul braced her feet against the bio-

chimneys, just out of reach of the spike, and ducked low as some instinct warned her of the pincered tail snapping up towards her head. She drove the spear down again and again, the keening cry growing louder with each plunge. The tyrant bucked and roared, but still she held on. With a final thrust, Itheíul felt the spinal cord sever and the blade plunge into softer flesh.

The tyrant collapsed, convulsing. Itheíul leapt from the crashing tyranid and rolled as she met the ground. She did not look back to check if the tyrant was dead; the swarm's sudden disorientation told her enough. The nearest creatures in the chittering wave simply perished from the shock of the synaptic backlash. Others ceased their stampede towards the webway gate and began leaping up at the swooping windriders. The remaining bodyguards, blinded with the tyrant's death, rampaged and hewed apart anything within reach. Itheíul pushed through the ache in every muscle of her body and, barely keeping balance, sprinted towards the body of her brother.

Itheíul cut down the fodder that lunged towards her, predator after predator rent open by the broad spearhead. The brothers circled around her and shredded anything that sought to take her unawares. With a shout, she ran through a monster that fed on Arsan's body, and kicked the vermin away.

The warlock's once proud form now seemed delicate, like the bones of a fallen shimmerwing. Bloody puncture wounds ringed his ruined neck. Itheíul cradled her brother's fragile body against her, and brought her hand to his spirit stone. Upon her touch, the mounting in the rune armour dilated and she took the gem. The deep-green stone was hot, even through the fingers of her suit. Tears burned her face. She heard voices, her name, and was dimly aware of the tyranids closing in on her. Múrien and Seoladh hovered close now, firing their catapults point-blank.

Flashes of light erupted around Itheíul. Scores of tyranids were cut down by scatter laser and shuriken fire, or were blown apart by Vyper-mounted missile launchers. Itheíul registered the silver-and-blue streaks of Shining Spears charging the largest predators, while windriders attacked the chitinous infantry. Cainasairre, chieftain of Clan Tyllach, had arrived, and those with him were among the finest Wild Riders of Saim-Hann. But to Itheíul, they had come far too late. She screamed her despair and let the

world tremble.

The death of Deniadol was marked in fire. The Exodites had erected massive pyres around the webway gate, the timbers of the planet's last trees laden with the dead. It would be their final mark upon their world, a last statement of claim to their home. The Exodites had extended the honour of their pyres to the fallen Asuryani, Arsan among them. The Asuryani regarded the corpses as little more than emptied vessels, as their souls were preserved in their waystones, but the honour was not lost on the Wild Riders.

It would be a brief time before the hive fleet rebirthed its synapse creatures and restored purpose to the swarm, but reprieve enough for the aeldari to withdraw from the maiden world and sever the webway to Deniadol. The Saim-Hann fleet would attempt to incinerate as many of the hive's feeder tendrils as they could before withdrawing, but the tyranid swarm would leave the system glutted and regenerated. The seers foresaw its path leading into the Imperium of Man, going on to consume dozens more systems before being snuffed out, but the tendril offered no further threat to the Asuryani.

Perhaps, in another age, free of war and conflict, the Exodites might return to breathe life anew into the planet, reigniting the embers of the World Spirit left to smoulder. But if peace was to be bought at such a price, Itheiul wondered, would any of the aeldari be left to see it?

'Saim-Hann bled for the lives of many,' Itheiul said. 'Yet I do not understand why you had to be first to the beast. The chieftain was so close. Had we delayed our assault—'

Honour is nothing if there is not survival, Arsan interrupted. His anger cooled, the baritone near-voice of his psychic projection settled into a tone of counsel. *When I looked upon the skein, fate balanced victory upon our intervention. Cainasairre was destined to fail, and the clan would perish with him. The deaths at the gate would have been many. Such sacrifice was the only path.*

'You knew you would die?'

It was a possibility, just as there were many strands in which we would never even make it to the Devourer. As in all decisions we make, the future

can change over the smallest choice. Our kin fight on across a thousand battlefields, battling so the aeldari might yet see that future.

‘Why did you not warn me? I could have acted, I could have stopped—’

I could not turn back from victory, even if such a route might lead to my death. And if that was to be the outcome, I would not let you put my life before your own. Yet now you face another kind of death.

Itheiul opened her mouth to protest, to say that any threat here in the craftworld’s heart would have been met by the entirety of Saim-Hann’s defenders, but she knew this was not the danger of which her brother’s spirit warned her. She looked down to her hands: she had taken on a ghostly complexion. How many cycles had passed since she had last seen the light of the craftworld’s artificial sun? When had she last eaten, or laughed amongst her kin?

Lingering on the Path of Grief is a slow death, but death all the same, Itheiul.

Itheiul nodded, despite the gesture’s redundancy. She leaned forward and lifted her brother’s spirit stone to her chest. Warmth still lingered, and a galaxy of light swirled beneath its glasslike surface. She stood and took the spear in her other hand, a tingle of psychic energy thrumming through her fingers. She stepped forward slowly, into the light of the infinity circuit. It was time to return her brother to the craftworld’s heart, and take the first steps along a new path.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Southin lives with his black cat familiar Ringo in Vancouver, Canada where he can live out the illusion of being an aelven wanderer, write poetry and never finish painting his many, many armies. After twenty years of writing Warhammer fiction in exercise books, 'Path of Grief' is his first story for Black Library.

An extract from *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*.



Never trust a god.

You can be certain of one thing, if anything. Gods order the universe to their design and nothing else, and you can be sure that your wants and needs feature little in their agenda. For the aeldari, distrusting gods is in their nature, having been abandoned by one pantheon of godheads and destroyed by the birth scream of a deity forged from their own wanton excess. Such experience breeds caution if not outright contempt.

And of the gods that survived – excepting that ravenous maw of destruction known as She Who Thirsts – they are but a pale shadow of their former status. Khaine, shattered into little pieces of angry metal and scattered through the craftworlds. Cegorach, the supreme trickster, the Laughing God, dancing merrily through the webway just one step ahead of the predatory intent of the Great Enemy, plucking souls from his grasp as and when chance allows.

So imagine the towering hubris of not only serving a god in such times, but trying to create one.

Such accusation cannot be levelled wholly upon the first of our players in this plot, for she was unwittingly brought into the fold of the Ynnari, something of a cosmic side effect. Collateral deification one might call it. The hubris was that of Eldrad Ulthran, but the weight of his mistake – his error being to only partially succeed in bringing about the apotheosis of Ynnead, god of the dead – fell upon the shoulders of Yvraine, formerly the Daughter of Shadows and many other titles before and since.

Far too complex for this retelling are the tales that led to this terrible turn of events and their immediate consequence. They are but a few threads in the tapestry of a galaxy torn asunder by the resurgence of the Dark Powers

and the failures of aeldari and human alike.

But while Eldrad did not bring about the rise of Ynnead, he did succeed in part, for in the wake of his actions came the Ynnari, sworn to find and unite the croneswords of Morai-Heg to bring about the final elevation of the Whispering God.

So they believe.

Myths, like gods, should be treated with some scepticism also. They have a habit of being retold to the benefit of the teller. You would not doubt the advice of this reliable narrator would you?

In pursuing this goal, the Ynnari broke a craftworld – Biel-tan – and brought much grief to the aeldari, but from these ashes arose a new understanding with some of the servants of the Emperor. One was brought forth from the distant past, a true legend from the time when the Emperor of Mankind walked abroad among the mortals, rather than existed as a vampiric husk sustained by the souls of his own servants and technology stolen from the aeldari.

This individual was a primarch, whom humanity foolishly called a man in their ignorance of what their master had truly created. Roboute Guilliman, their finest leader and statesman, a warrior and commander beyond anything their crumbling empire could muster in the previous ten thousand orbits of their homeworld.

Even so, the tide was not stopped, but it was slowed and the dominance of the Realm of Chaos stemmed for a time.

And by roundabout means we come back to the tale of Yvraine, who had dared the heart of vileness known as the Eye of Terror, the storm that swallowed the centre of the old aeldari dominions, on an errand for Guilliman. As part of a grander scheme between aeldari and humans, she had promised to retrieve an artefact of Chaos from the clutches of a renegade primarch, the daemon prince of Nurgle, called Mortarion by the humans.

She is, unexpectedly, in danger. We join her as she flees the castle of the daemon prince with her prize, the Hand of Darkness, passing through the metaphysical Garden of Grandfather Nurgle himself to reach the relative sanctuary of the webway. Her small force was beset by plaguebearers and slobbering beasts of Nurgle, their portal to safety waning in its power.

Rancid matter dripped along the length of the Sword of Sorrows and dribbled over the knuckles of Yvraine's armoured glove. A thick swarm of red-and-black flies closed about the daemon blood, sticking to the gelatinous filth as they supped on escaping warp energy. She fought back her disgust and hewed *Kha-vir* into the next foe, another gangling, pot-bellied plaguebearer with a cyclopean face and protruding horn. It bared razor teeth in an inane grin even as its rusted blade shattered on the runesuit beneath her layers of courtly attire. The psychically-charged armour pulsed with silver light in the other-realm of Nurgle's garden, just as the Sword of Sorrows seemed as much a blade of keening despair as a physical object. She cleaved away the plaguebearer's arm. More ichor spewed, splashing thickly to the mouldering leaves that covered the ground.

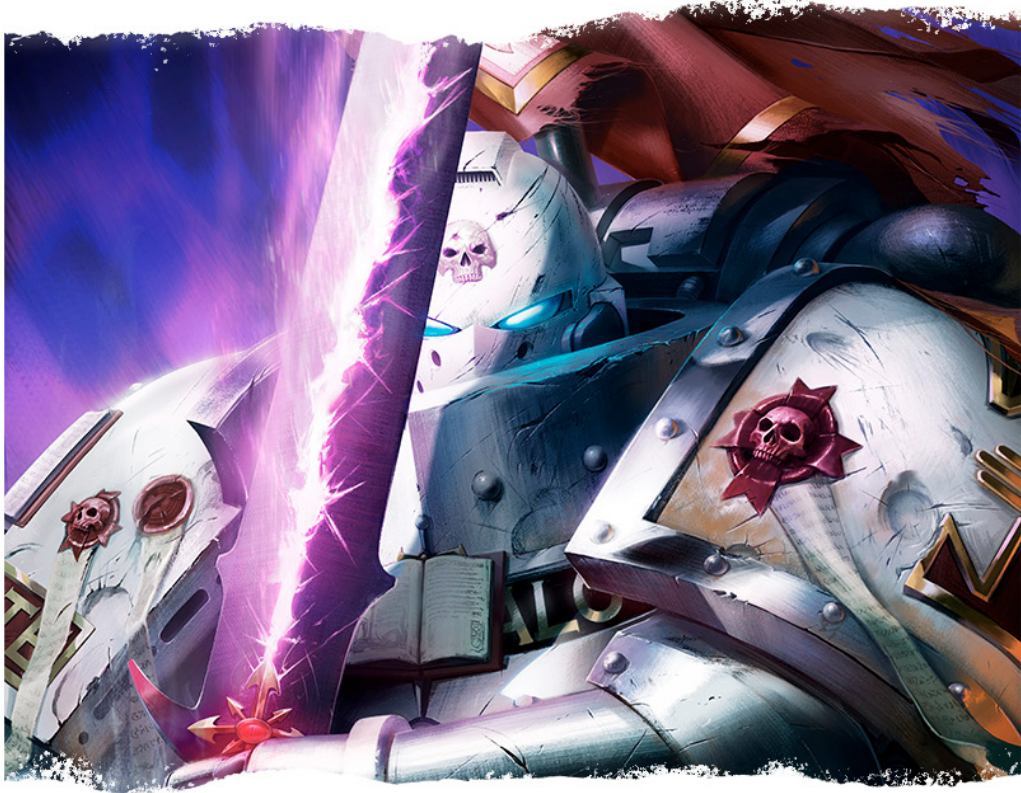
Yvraine finished it off with another cut, severing neck and shoulder with a single blow.

Ahead she could see her goal swirling through the canopy of decaying foliage and twisted branches of a dismal forest. The shimmer of the portal ebbed, becoming a little fainter with every heartbeat, the link back to the webway succumbing to the inevitable erosion of Nurgle's power. If it closed...

She did not think any further along those lines. It was impossible to countenance failure. She had been anointed as the emissary of a god, her purpose was far higher than any mortal battle.

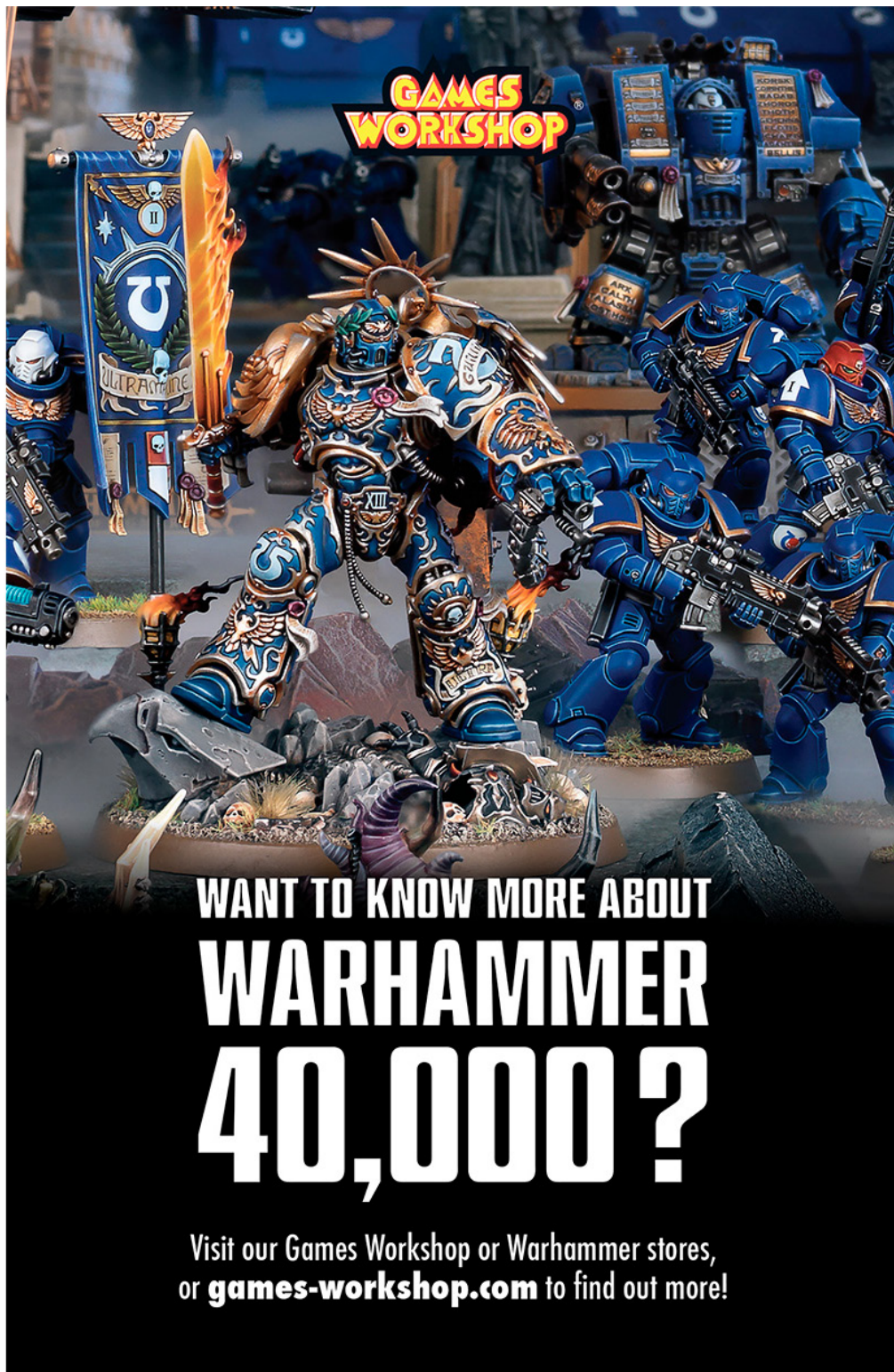
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