



WARHAMMER[®]
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THE PATH FORSAKEN

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The spirehalls and chambers of Great Iyanden seemed to float on the distant reverence of shrinesong and mournful mantras. For Una Belphoebe – ranger and outcast – the haunting chorale was simultaneously what was most beautiful and oppressive about her craftworld home. Wherever she travelled in a galaxy broad and deep, she carried its serenity in her heart. A calm and certainty that called her back to mighty Iyanden. Here, however – saturated in the intensity of order and at the intersection of so many of her people’s paths – it drove her to the wayport. To the portals and the possibilities that lay beyond.

As she buried provisions and spare crystal cores into the depths of her cameleoline cloak and satchelpack, the ranger felt that she was no longer alone in her preparations. She stopped for a moment.

‘Farseer Kelmon.’

‘Una Belphoebe,’ the aged eldar said. As the Farseer entered the chamber, his staff tapped against the wraithbone of the wayport floor. ‘I see the frightened child I once knew in the eldar before me. Running away again, ranger?’

‘I fear nothing...’ Belphoebe said.

‘That’s what scares me, child.’

‘More lectures, farseer. Must we do this again?’

‘No lectures, child.’

‘Then I bid you farewell,’ the ranger said, scooping up her helm and long rifle. ‘Please pass on the dutiful respects of a daughter, should you see my father.’

‘Where are you headed?’ Kelmon asked.

‘You tell me, farseer.’

‘You return to Ephraeleon,’ Kelmon told her, ‘to enjoy the embrace of the Exodite, lovesick and starry of eye.’

‘Metaphors do not become you, sir.’

‘Nor the backwater worlds you, my child.’

‘Did my father send you?’ Belphoebe asked.

‘The bed of Isarion Stormsmourn calls to you,’ the farseer accused.

‘That is none of your concern, venerable seer,’ the ranger told him. ‘Stay out of my future.’

‘I wish that I could,’ Kelmon said, turning the ranger towards the webway portal, ‘but you walk into it blind. The romance of adventure cripples you. Use your foresight, child. See the doom that awaits you and your backwater prince.’

Belphoebe allowed the rush of time and distance to wash over her. She peered briefly into eternity and found her way to the Exodite world of Ephraeleon. She soared above its rugged peaks and the cloudy canopy of its vapour forests. The exotic cacophony of life rose to meet her. The hiss of the steam vents grew to a harsh, alien seething. The profusion of forest life descended into the clacking, snapping and the screeching of beasts from the beyond.

‘No,’ Belphoebe whispered.

‘The Great Devourer stakes its claim,’ Kelmon told her. ‘Swarm fleets appearing from the coldest void, fresh from feasting on the mon-keigh and the outlying empires. The worlds of wine and honey stand in the Devourer’s path. Exodite worlds. Myrandias. Q’sandritoc... Ephraeleon.’

‘I have to warn them,’ Belphoebe said.

‘It’s too late, child. Though it pains me greatly, Ephraeleon’s time has come. Its skies darken with the doom to come. From lifeless rock it sprang and to lifeless rock it will soon return. To the loss of all.’

‘We can evacuate the tribes through the world gates,’ the ranger said, not listening.

‘Isarion Stormsmourn will not abandon his paradise to the tyrant,’ Kelmon said artfully. ‘You know this. The savage prince is skilful but proud. He united the great equatorial tribes, buckling them like a belt about their world. He led dragon riders, worldsingers and scouts to victory against the Corpse-Emperor’s armoured kin and drove the destructive green invader from the surface of Ephraeleon. The shadow in the warp begins to cloud my sight. But it is clear that Isarion will convince himself – and others – that this new threat can be met. But it cannot. The paradise will perish and his people will be lost to the voidspawn, their number countless and cold. The galaxy will be denied a world and the eldar a legend in the making.’

‘It makes no difference. I...’

‘Say it. Speak the words.’

‘I love him,’ Belphoebe told the farseer and herself. ‘I will go to him. Do not think to stop me.’

‘Fate forbids that I stand between the destined and their destiny,’ Kelmon replied.

‘Fate is with me?’

‘The crone is fickle, speaking in riddles about half-truths yet to come,’ the farseer said. ‘The skeins have revealed to me that your noble savage might be one of the foretold princes of providence, guardians of the east, fiery beacons to be lit on the dark frontier.’

‘You begin to sound like your crone, seer.’

‘You have served our people well,’ Kelmon said, ‘as outcast and as one of us. You have been the craftworld’s eyes on distant worlds. Your rifle has been an end to enemies and the finger on its trigger light in the taking of treasures once ours. Isarion Stormsmourn is not a treasure of our past, but our future. Mighty Iyanden calls for him.’

‘You want me to deliver Isarion, but not his people?’ a stunned Belphoebe asked.

‘He has a bright future,’ the farseer said. ‘His people do not.’

‘You argue with yourself, Lord Kelmon. As you said, the prince will not abandon his world.’

‘None of the other treasures you recovered for me had such a say in their recovery,’ Kelmon told her. The ranger’s heart felt like stone in her chest.

‘He will hate me for eternity.’

‘Eternity is the price you pay for the love he bears for his people... and yours, in turn, for him. Fate has found a use for such wanton blindness. Now you see?’

Belphoebe stared back into the portal, allowing the impossible trajectories of the webway to carry the gaze of her tear-glazed eyes to distant Ephraeleon. As she drank in the doom of the Exodite world, she became lost in the shrieking of alien beasts, an ear-splitting horror that grew and grew until... silence.

‘I see.’

The searing crack of interdimensional energy. This was followed by another. And another. The arcs intensified into a blaze as the agitated space at the centre of the webway portal achieved actuality. The sizzle of translation erupted about the cloaked silhouettes – one, two, three, four, five – that cleared the gate with feline grace, landing lightly in the surrounding undergrowth.

They became immediately immersed in an equatorial fug of sound and heat, as

the vapour forests and Ephraeleon highlands closed in about them. Steam rose from groundvents and snaked its way through the thick, blue foliage and up into the forest canopy. The air was thick with the buzz of vapour-shrimp and the croaks of tree-hugging amphibia that swooped down through the swarms on webbed limb-wings, collecting the bounty in their great, ballooning gullets. Condensed droplets fell in fat splatters from the tree tops. Cutting through the miasma, Belphoebe could hear tree imps in the canopy, shrieking their alarm at the rangers' arrival and the booming, reptilian squawk of some feathered but flightless behemoth in the distance.

'Helms and pan-spectrals,' Belphoebe ordered, as the rangers slipped their heads into slender helmets and activated the sights on their long-rifles. With a soft chirp and a hum, both rifles and scopes were primed. 'Switch to thoughtcasting.'

Belphoebe heard the voices of her rangers echo about her mind. During the often covert nature of their enterprises, where the presence of a ranger might be advertised by traditional communications, thoughtcasting became invaluable. With practice, an eldar could telepathically commune with a group of kindred and ensure the silence essential to a ranger's survival.

+Darhedron, harmonised.+

+Kal-Saar, harmonised.+

+Tassarion, harmonised.+

Kal-Saar and Tassarion were brothers. Like Belphoebe, they were keen-eyed Iyanden eldar who shared a talent for offworld hunting. Darhedron was Belphoebe's right hand. Short and scrappy for an eldar, the ranger was the veteran scout of hundreds of alien worlds and was both the voice of cautious experience and enthusiasm for new ventures. Hailing from Biel-Tan, Darhedron was well-suited to aid the Exodite cause on Darhedron, though his craftworld's own farseers had apparently been blinded to the danger. Belphoebe had not been entirely truthful with any of them about the true reason for their expedition and the dangers they would face. As their minds intruded upon one another, she was careful to guard such secrets and insincerities.

+Helshandra, harmonise,+ Belphoebe said with irritation. Helshandra had been a different case entirely. Following Farseer Kelmon's warning, Belphoebe had needed a fifth ranger, and fast. Helshandra was young and inquisitive, drifting from path to path but longing for adventure that could only be found beyond the wraithbone walls of the craftworld. She was not without talent with a long-rifle but was too young to take up the mantle of the outcast. In a moment of necessity,

Belphoebe silenced her personal misgivings about the girl and finally gave in to her entreaties.

+Harmonised,+ the young recruit confirmed finally. +Why is everything blue?+

+Darhedron,+ Belphoebe prompted.

+The Exodite world's sun is lacking in cardinal frequencies,+ the ranger informed her. 'This affects the... soul of the vegetation and everything that eats it.+'

+And everything that eats everything that eats it,+ Helshandra replied.

+She has a point,+ Kal-Saar admitted. +Adjust scopes and crystal refraction for spectral deficiencies.+'

+The lesson is ended,+ Belphoebe said. While Darhedron and the others considered such tutelage essential to Helshandra's survival – and by extension, their own – Belphoebe knew they had no time for such indulgence. +Darhedron, our surroundings. What can you tell us?+'

The undergrowth swooshed as Darhedron moved lightly through it, studying the signs and symbols of alien nature.

+We're on a game trail,+ Darhedron announced, after a moment of consideration.

+Why place a gate on a game trail?+' Helshandra asked.

+The trail exists because of the gate,+ Belphoebe interrupted with some annoyance.

+Visitors are the game?+'

+Listen and you might learn something,+ Belphoebe told her.

+The ground's worn here+ The leaves of a groundshrub rattled as Darhedron pulled them close. He sniffed. +Evidence of a kill here. Some blood. Tracks indicate predation. Large megafauna.+'

At that moment, the raw, reptilian bellow of some forest beast erupted in the distance.

+Isarion's dragons,+ Belphoebe mused.

+I thought you said you had been here,+ Helshandra put to her.

+Different gate. Tassarion, find a waystone and commune with the world spirit. We need guidance, the fastest route to the colonies. We need to find the seat of Ishtariel-La.+'

+Yes, mistress.+ The ranger slipped through the mist and foliage, out of sight.

+Something's coming,+ Darhedron warned them suddenly.

+Dissemble,+ Belphoebe ordered and the rangers melted into the vapour

forest. With a swish, the eldar were gone, one with their surroundings. The sound of forest life re-intruded on the scene, including the snorts of an approaching jungle forager. The creature was all tusk, multi-snout and swollen belly. It snuffled its way towards the webway portal but as it did the sounds of the forest died away. The forager sniffed at the air.

The surrounding trees suddenly gave an agonising groan, the brumewoods shearing and snapping as they were pushed aside by the storming charge of some great beast of the forest. The ground shook with the steps of a colossal, feathered biped, a thick muscular tail balancing in the squat jaws of a vapour forest predator. The raw, reptilian bellow of the monster rattled the canopy. The thumping stomp of its charge carried it past the webway portal. The forager squealed and ran, but with a sweep of its jaws, the monster had it. After the brief horror of snorter's death-shrieks, the portal-site filled with the flesh-squelching, bone-crunching mastication of the feeding beast.

Suddenly the megasaur stopped. With half the carcass still dripping from its maw, it raised its ungainly skull and – like its prey had done previously – sniffed at the air. From above came a sky-shattering roar of another Exodite world creature. The call was a doom-laden announcement of predacious superiority. The beating of great leathery wings thrashed the treetops before a pair of gigantic, scaly talons crashed down through the canopy. The flying reptile hammered down into the megasaur, burying its giant talons in the creature's muscular back flesh. The megasaur gave a shriek of shock as it was skewered by the beast's claws. The monster's mighty wings took it once again into the heavens and the megasaur was torn skywards, its pitiful moans drifting away into the distance.

After a few moments, the chorus of forest life returned, and with it, the ranger Tassarion.

+It's gone,+ he told the hidden eldar. With a whisper of foliage, the rangers revealed themselves.

+The world spirit?+ Belphoebe put to him.

+Indicates that the colonies are a few hours to the east,+ Tassarion said. +For Ishtariel-La we will have to cross the highlands.+

+It's situated amongst paddy terraces cut into the mountainsides, upland crops and the like,+ Belphoebe said. +A few hours?+

+The passes and crossings will take longer,+ Tassarion informed her. +The route takes us up through some harsh country.+

+We don't have a few hours,+ Belphoebe returned. +Single file, double-stride.

We stop for nothing. Darhedron, take scout-point. Be the breeze whistling through the trees, the crooks and canyons. Find me a way through this forest. Kal-Saar, the wind at our backs.+

+What is that in the sky?+ Helshandra asked, pointing up through the demolished canopy. The rangers peered up at the firmament. The sky was streaked with swirling clouds and the trails of cyst-spores that speckled the heavens like a glowing rash or affliction.

+That's invasion,+ Belphoebe told her. +That's the descent of the Great Devourer. That's why we don't have a few hours. Rangers, move out.+

Una Belphoebe was young by the standards of her race. She was in the peak of her physical prime, however, her long legs carrying her at speed – and with a dancer's grace – through the vapour forest's tangled ascent. Still, the eldar found herself pushed to her physical limits by the Ephraeleon highlands. Darhedron raced ahead, forcing his mistress and her rangers to keep the relentless pace. Cradling her long-rifle at the ready and with her cameleoline cloak flowing behind her like a rippling mirror of the surroundings through which she leapt, rolled and darted, Belphoebe did her best to keep up. All she knew was the rapid staccato in her chest, the unusual labour of her breathing and the light crunch of her footfalls scudding through the undergrowth. The young Helshandra, eager to impress, was at her heels every step, with the brothers bringing up the rear.

With the foliage whipping by and the forest haunted by the calls of alarmed beasts, Belphoebe occasionally risked a glance up through breaks in the canopy. The sky was dark with the Great Devourer's plummeting heralds of doom. She had heard reports from fellow rangers – presented as tales of caution – regarding the eastern homesteads and worlds of the fringe. Worlds stripped bare of organic life by some voracious galactic plague. What Lord Kelmon had told her of the tyrannid scourge haunted her further.

'What are they?' Belphoebe had asked.

'The beginning of the end.' the farseer had replied. 'The talon-tip of a greater doom to come. Something reaching out for us from beyond the galaxy. Something insatiable and unswerving in its desire to assimilate all life as we conceive of it.'

'How do we stop it?'

'You don't halt such ruination. It is an apex predator writ large upon the galaxy. You get out of its path. You allow it to feed on enemy empires, while you save your own.'

‘Ever has it been the path of the Iyanden people to evade adversity.’

‘Though Iyanden has faced the tyrannid and survived.’

‘What of the Exodite worlds on the fringe?’ Belphoebe asked. ‘Evasion is not an option for them.’

‘The Exodites are nomads. They will do what they did before,’ Kelmon assured her. ‘They will travel light and travel far. Though they will lose much, theirs will become a guerrilla war, their tribes running and fighting from world to world. And Isarion Stormsmourn will lead them.’

+Cover break,+ Darhedron thoughtcast suddenly, bringing the rangers to a halt at the edge of the vapour forest.

+Report,+ Belphoebe ordered.

+Arable land, cleared for crops,+ Darhedron said. +Terrace paddies leading up the mountainside to a settlement.+

+That’s Ishtariel-La, the seat of the old chieftain,+ Belphoebe confirmed.

+Is that smoke?+ Darhedron asked.

+Kal?+ asked Belphoebe.

Kal-Saar’s scope hummed as he brought it to his helm. +Vanguard organisms,+ he confirmed.

+What are we waiting for?+ Helshandra asked.

+Wait,+ Darhedron said. +Look, on the terrace. The labourers, out by the spirit posts.+

The scout pointed out a group of Exodite labourers, desperately trying to bring a terrified beast of burden under control. The long-necked megadon trumpeted its fear and stamped down into the paddy with its colossal feet, causing a thunderous splash. Meanwhile, the Exodite farmers unchained their draft animal from the logs it was clearing and called their calming command up at the creature.

+Mistress,+ Kal-Saar said, still behind his humming scope. +The sky.+

The rangers looked up just in time to see a flock of winged horrors sweep down from the heavens and out across the glassy surface of the paddy.

+Dissemble!+

The sky-slashing swarm seared past, a swooping rush of flapping wings and screeching jaws. The flock whirled and banked before ripping through the Exodite labourers and their beast of burden. The megadon’s trumpeting alarm and the brief screams of the farmers were lost in the nightmare of slashing jaws and barbs that shredded the exposed group.

+Darhedron?+ Belphoebe said finally.

+There's next to no cover on the approach,+ Darhedron replied.

+Well, what is there?+

+The spirit posts are made of crystal,+ the scout replied. +They occur at intervals up through the terrace. If we watch the angle of approach and put them between us and the flock, they should offer some protection.+

+That's suicide,+ Helshandra offered.

+If those things are out here, imagine what horrors the settlement is facing. Imagine what Isarion is facing.+

+How can you know he'll be here?+ Helshandra challenged.

+This is the chieftain's seat, his father's settlement. He'll be there.+

+But how can you know?+

+He'll be there,+ Belphoebe insisted. +Darhedron will lead. Use the spirit posts at intervals. Run. Run as fast as you can. They're on a second pass for what's left. Darhedron, go.+

As the ranger sprinted through the paddy, his footfalls created quickfire splashes in the flooded field. Slamming his back into the crystal of the spirit post, Darhedron took a moment to catch his breath and scan the skies.

+Helshandra, with me.+

Splashing through the shallows, Belphoebe could hear the descending shriek of the swarm behind her. With a grunt of exertion, she reached the first spirit post.

+Mistress!+ Helshandra called, her natural speed and grace of little help to her on the swampy terrace.

+Give me your hand!+ Snatching for one another, Belphoebe hauled the young eldar to her. With a splosh, Helshandra and her mistress slammed their backs to the crystal monolith and allowed the screeching flock of skyborne rippers to slash past.

+Run!+ she ordered the young ranger, not daring to waste a moment.

+Tassarion, Kal-Saar.+

+Coming.+

+On our way.+

Suddenly the air was alive with the roar of a rapid descent. A fleshy pod had streaked down out of the heavens. The thing struck the terrace and proceeded both to steam and boil the paddy water about it. A horrid cracking noise gave indication that some engineered horror was about to emerge.

+Go around!+ Kal-Saar told his brother.

+Rangers, target presented,+ Belphoebe thoughtcast. Kneeling down in the

water where they stood, Darhedron, Helshandra and their mistress brought the humming scopes of their rifles up. Needlepoint beams of intense energy seared across the paddy and over each other, before fading on the breeze. They punctured the pod and lanced through the emerging beast within, whose building bellow descended into a wet, chitinous death rattle.

+Tassarion, come on,+ Belphoebe urged.

+Flock inbound,+ Darhedron informed them.

+Come on!+

+They're not going to make it,+ Helshandra stated. Belphoebe knew the girl was right.

+Down!+ The ranger ordered. +Get down in the shallows.+

The two brothers splashed down into the paddy water, Tassarion a moment after his brother. The sky-slashers screeched their way across the terrace, coming in low. Latching onto Tassarion with their ripper-jaws and wing-talons, the flock took the screaming eldar up into the air, tearing and shredding him as they flew. As Kal-Saar rose from the shallows he brought up his long-rifle and sent several long, searing beams into the swarm, grimly hoping to hit his brother and end his suffering. The rapid beams that followed were meant for the monsters but did little except punch pointless holes through the flock.

+Kal-Saar,+ Belphoebe thoughtcast. +I need you to move.+ When the ranger answered with more useless blasts at the banking swarm, she added, +Ranger, I lead, you follow. Move.+

After perilous moments of silence, Kal-Saar splashed to his feet.

+Yes, mistress,+ he replied and ran through the shallows, joining Belphoebe, Helshandra and Darhedron at the paddy edge.

+Kal-Saar, I—+ Helshandra began.

+Darhedron, Kal-Saar, on to the settlement,+ Belphoebe ordered.

+Give him a moment,+ Helshandra shot back.

As the rangers' foliage-crunching footsteps carried them on to Ishtariel-La, Belphoebe turned on the young eldar.

+He does not need your pity, child.+

+He lost a brother.+

+As Isarion loses a world and the world its people. Time will not wait on your tears. Tassarion was a ranger, like his brother. They knew the risks. The outcast's path is a perilous one. Tassarion's loss is a tragedy but grief serves no-one but yourself. Like I said, Kal-Saar does not need your pity. He needs you to learn quickly and do your job. Do you understand?+

+Yes mistress.+

+Onwards, ranger.+

Belphoebe and Helshandra caught up with the remaining rangers on the edge of Ishtariel-La. The settlement was ablaze. Fire raged about the intricate heartwood structures, crackling and spitting furiously. There was confusion. There was terror. Harbinger organisms of the tyranid invasion force were erupting from the treeline. Hissing monsters sprang through the billowing banks of smoke and set upon screaming eldar as they tried to get their friends and families to safety. Talons sank into back-flesh. Scything limbs plunged into torsos with startling precision. Heads were torn clean off in mid-scream by snapping jaws. Chitinous horrors leapt from body to butchered body, leaving the blood-splattered carcasses of eldar in the wake of their frenetic savagery.

+Darhedron, report.+

+Vanguard organisms have reached the settlements.+

+They are barely the beginning,+ Belphoebe told him, amidst the horrible hissing and screeching. Several of these turned to shrill wails of death as Exodites cut through encroaching specimens with their single-shot shuriken casters. +There's the communal dome, the chieftain's seat. That's where we'll find Isarion. Helshandra, Darhedron, with me. We'll seek an audience with the chieftain and his son.+

+Don't you think they might be a little preoccupied?+ Darhedron said.

+Among all these unwelcome guests, I've got the feeling that they'll be glad to see us,+ Belphoebe returned.

+Belphoebe, I know you know these people. But we've got to be in and out. The descents are intensifying. Once the invasion moves on to the next phase, we'll be cut off.+

+Don't you think I know that?+ Belphoebe put to him. +Kal-Saar, are you with us?+

+To the end, mistress.+

+Dissemble here. I need you to provide cover fire for our approach. Hold this exit point. Like Darhedron says, we'll be in and out. Can you do that?+

+Go.+

With Belphoebe leading the way, the three rangers broke cover and ran into the chaos and confusion. With measured steps and elegance of rolls, bobs and weaving vaults, the rangers negotiated the unfolding havoc like a steeplechase. The cacophony of battle intensified and faded about them. The crackle and hiss

of fires. The screams of the savaged. The leaping screeches of invader organisms, the frenetic slaughter that followed. Clawing. Stabbing. Snapping.

+Three points east,+ Darhedron warned. Belphebe blasted through an oncoming construct. +Elevation minus two.+ Belphebe cut through another leaping monstrosity.

+South-west by west,+ Belphebe fed back. +Allow for obscurity.+

Darhedron fired off a shot from his long-rifle. +Got it.+

+Flanking!+ Helshandra piped up from behind.

+Over my shoulder,+ Belphebe ordered.

+Over mine,+ Darhedron countered. The two rangers fired over each other, turning a pair of furious screeches into trailing hiss-whimpers.

+Come on!+ Darhedron thoughtcast.

Helshandra screamed as a chitinous beast leapt from the flaming ruins of a nearby structure and landed on the ranger, its carapace still alight.

+Darhedron!+ Belphebe called as the pair of rangers turned and landed blows of the creature with the stocks of their long-rifles. +Back, beast!+ Belphebe roared as she slammed it before turning the weapon around and releasing a blast into its abdomen. Helshandra shrieked again as a second monster scuttled across her prone form.

+Another!+ Darhedron announced.

+Mistress!+ Helshandra pleaded. Jaws snapped for the young ranger's maskplate with pneumatic insistence. The *whoosh* of a beam passed through the thing's bulbous head, spreading what passed for its brain across Helshandra.

+Kal-Saar?+ Helshandra managed.

+Get up,+ Kal-Saar thoughtcast.

Among the screeching, screaming and the discharge of weapons, a rumble grew. Something deep and troubling. Something that led the ground to tremble and the settlement structures to shake.

+What *is* that?+ Belphebe thoughtcast.

The ground ahead of them gave way like a colossal sinkhole. Showering grit and stones, a monstrous, serpentine behemoth rose out of the ground, great tunnelling appendage blades clicking and rattling before it.

+We have a big problem,+ Darhedron confirmed.

+Kal-Saar,+ Belphebe thoughtcast.

+Scope and spectrals offer nothing on vulnerabilities,+ Kal-Saar informed her. The rattling grew to a horrible insistence, presaging a mind-shattering shriek and a lunge forward.

+Darhedron, roll!+ Belphoebe ordered. The tunnelling talon came down, stabbing into the ground as the ranger tumbled through the grit. +Again!+ Belphoebe warned as it stabbed down with another colossal appendage. +Kal-Saar, disarm it... literally.+

A succession of sizzling beams cut through the wrist-gristle of several scything blades, causing the weapons to crash to the ground and dribble ichor. The monster shrieked its fury and Darhedron rolled clear. Once again a doom-laden rumble reached up through the ground beneath their boots. Earth erupted about the rangers.

+Two more,+ Kal-Saar reported. +You're cut off.+

+We must abort,+ Darhedron said.

+He's right,+ a shaken Helshandra added.

+No,+ Belphoebe shot back. +We do what we came here to do. I will not take the coward's path.+ Her words were lost in the air-trembling screech of the three tyranid monstrosities, which in turn were lost in a reptilian belly-roar from the heavens.

+Above you!+ Kal-Saar suddenly called. +Dragon riders!+

The sound of the belly-roar rode on the beating of great, leathery wings. The tyranid constructs hissed, spat and shrieked their acknowledgement of the threat, uncoiling the rattling chitin of their serpentine forms from the ground.

+It's Isarion!+ Belphoebe announced. +Down!+

The sound of a building eruption was unleashed as the lead mount launched a stream of flame from its scaly jaws. The stream was joined by two others as the flying reptiles engulfed the tyranid constructs in a fiery inferno. The invader organisms shrieked and sizzled in the fires. One of the mighty reptiles flapped down into a landing, sinking its great talons into the nearest tyranid tunneller. The organism spat and rattled, hissing its alien enmity at the dragon and its rider. The sky beast roared back.

+Forward,+ Belphoebe ordered, but the thunderous clash of the behemoths, entwined about one another, took them crashing through settlement structures and invader organisms waiting to pounce. +Wait, back!+ Belphoebe thoughtcast. The tyranid construct shrieked and snapped its jaws at the flying reptile, while the dragon crunched through the alien's thick carapace with its powerful jaws.

The beating of wings signified a second sky beast coming in to land. Unclasping the plastic-crystal seals and removing her helm, Belphoebe called, 'Isarion!'

+Mistress,+ Kal-Saar thoughtcast. +The swarm.+

Scanning the skies, Belphoebe saw the flock of rippers, like an inkblot on the heavens. It was searing up behind the great winged reptile.

‘Isarion!’ Belphoebe called again. The rippers punched through the membrane of the dragon’s wings and tore up through its scaly flanks. The rider sensed his steed’s difficulty and guided it out across the canopy of the vapour forests. Like a cloud of barbs and razor-jaws, the ripper flock tore the groaning beast to shreds. ‘Isarion, the trees. Jump!’

Isarion Stormsmourn couldn’t have heard the ranger at that distance, but the prince had few options left to him. With a roar of defiance, Isarion leapt from the savaged reptile and dropped down through the treetops. The dragon rider plummeted awkwardly, clawing through the canopy, breaking both bones and branches as he tumbled down through the brumewoods. Isarion finally hit the ground with an ugly thud, groaning to himself and falling in and out of consciousness. Some distance away, the shredded carcass of his mount crashed into the forest.

For a moment, all was silent, but for the Exodite’s laboured breath. Then he heard the chitinous clicks and hissing of tyrannid constructs closing in. They leapt from tree to tree, their bounding weight rustling the leaves on the branches.

‘No,’ the Exodite warrior mumbled to himself, half-conscious. ‘No.’ He tried to move but the exertion produced an agonising wail. The bounding grew in speed. The hissing grew louder. Then suddenly, footsteps, swift and graceful through the forest.

+Darhedron!+ Belphoebe thoughtcast with desperate urgency. The vapour woods seared with the beams from their long rifles. Death-shrieks were followed by the crash of construct bodies meeting the ground.

+Is he alive?+ Helshandra asked.

+Get him up. Get him up,+ Belphoebe said. Isarion’s breathing became rapid and shallow. Movement prompted another wail of agony.

‘Isarion, look at me. It’s Una.’

‘Have to send word to the northern tribes,’ Isarion said, moving in and out of consciousness. ‘The worldsingers of Biel-Tan.’

+Arm and a leg broken,+ Darhedron reported, checking the Exodite over.
+Some lacerations. Probable collapsed lung and head trauma.+

‘The dragons of Araslein must be unleashed,’ Isarion continued. ‘The kindred of the lakes. I must warn my father... Our people...’

‘Isarion, it’s Una,’ the ranger insisted.

Beams sizzled through the trees once more.

+I've got targets,+ Kal-Saar thoughtcast. The forest came alive with the sound of invader organisms closing in on their position. +I've got lots of targets.+

'Una?' Isarion mumbled. 'Una!'

'I'm here,' she reassured him.

'Una, my father. For Isha's sake, my people.' Once again, the Exodite tried to get up but a teeth-clenching howl of agony put him back down.

'I know.'

Isarion's groans faded.

+The pain. He's out,+ Darhedron confirmed.

+Belphoebe,+ Kal-Saar thoughtcast. His firing intensified with the shrieks of dying constructs.

+What are we going to do?+ Helshandra asked.

+What do you mean?+ Belphoebe replied.

+We've got to go back.+

+There's no going back. Only forward. Farseer Kelmon taught me that.+

+You heard him, his people--+

+His people are doomed.+

+We can save them,+ Helshandra insisted.

+No.+

+It's what he would want.+

+Belphoebe!+ Kal-Saar called.

+This has nothing to do with *want*, child,+ Belphoebe shot back. +It has to do with *need*. Isarion Stormsmourn is needed elsewhere. It's destiny's decree.+

+You won't even try?+ Helshandra asked. +We could take the tribes back with us.+

+I'm not here to save them,+ Belphoebe told her. +I'm here to save him. Only him. If I do, he will look at me – if he can look at all – through your unforgiving eyes. But... that's the way it has to be.+

+Belphoebe,+ Helshandra said.

+It is done. You will learn, child, that it is futile to fight your future.+

+That's it,+ Kal-Saar said, stepping back through the sad scene. +We've got to go, right now.+

+I've got him,+ Darhedron thoughtcast.

+No,' Belphoebe insisted. +It's my burden. I'll carry him.+ Isarion moaned as the ranger picked him up and put him over her shoulder. +Single-file, double-stride. Back to the gate. We stop for nothing. Rangers, move out.+

The soft steam of groundvents. The buzz of vapour-shrimp. The pitter-patter of condensed droplets falling from canopy. Tree imps shrieking their alarm. The sear of rifle beams in the distance.

+Kal-Saar, come on!+ Belphoebe thoughtcast. The forest echoed with the last of the sizzling beams.

+I'm out,+ Kal-Saar reported.

+Me too,+ Helshandra comformed.

+It's not far,+ Belphoebe assured them. 'Darhedron, go ahead and activate the webway portal.' Isarion groaned with each of her heavy steps.

As Darhedron's own took him off, something crashed down through the forest canopy from above, a fleshy capsule that crackled with the heat of atmospheric entry. One of the Great Devourer's descent pods. It began to crack and split, unleashing tyranid horrors on the landing site. They clicked and spat their hatred for life.

+Dissemble,+ Belphoebe ordered. The eldar scattered, blending into the foliage. For the longest time, there was nothing but the inquisitive hissing of the tyranids' new arrivals and the soft moans of the Exodite prince.

The sudden crack of immaterial energies arcing across the nearby webway portal provoked the throng of monstrosities and they took off through the foliage.

+Go!+ Belphoebe ordered, and the rangers set off after them. They had only got a few steps before something leapt out of the trees at them, a towering, scythe-limbed hunter with feeder tendrils whipping from its open maw.

+Kal-Saar!+ Helshandra called out.

The beast had the ranger, who was beating it back with his fists. His ranger's knife whispered from its sheath and Kal-Saar stabbed at the monster that had him pinned to the forest floor. The construct had blades of its own, however, and proceeded to gore the eldar with mantid precision.

+Go for the gate,+ Kal-Saar spat.

+Come on!+ Belphoebe yelled.

+I,+ Helshandra mumbled, +I...+

+Move!+

The two rangers made for the warp gate, but as they approached the sizzling, arcing space within the wraithbone arch, Darhedron was nowhere to be seen.

+Where is he?+ Helshandra asked, breathless.

+Darhedron!+ Belphoebe called.

+Has he gone through?+

As they approached the webway portal, the pair of rangers could hear the snapping of bones and tearing of flesh. The tyranid constructs from the pod were hissing and snapping at one another in a feeding frenzy above the butchered mess that used to be Darhedron.

+No,+ Belphoebe said. +We will not make the same mistake. Go!+

With that the rangers' boots hit the wraithbone dais. As Isarion Stormsmourn groaned in and out of consciousness, the static of immaterial transference swallowed the three survivors of Ephraeleon. The portal crackled and snapped to intensity, before searing to silence. All that was left was the cacophony of alien menace. The horrid hissing, clicking and snapping of invader organisms, growing in intensity and announcing the Great Devourer's intention to assimilate every microbe of life the Exodite world had to offer.

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Rob Sanders is the author of *The Serpent Beneath*, a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Adeptus Mechanicus: Skitarius*, *Legion of the Damned*, *Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps* and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*, along with the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos*. He has also written many Quick Reads for the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls. The eldar of Craftworld Biel-Tan go to war, amongst them the warrior-women of the Howling Banshees.



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