

FARSEER

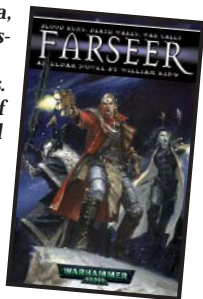
AN ELDAR NOVEL BY WILLIAM KING

'Darke has been approached by the eldar,' said Justina, and was pleased by the smile that played across her master's face. 'They have given him a dreamstone.'

Sudden anger swirled across the daemon's features. 'They must not be allowed to interfere, slave. The eve of my return approaches. We must have that man. He will be a vessel of rare power.'

Justina nodded, although fear suddenly filled her. 'Darke suspects nothing, master. He has given the dreamstone to me, to sell for money.'

Warm laughter echoed from within the mirror. 'How foolish mortals are,' the daemon said. 'To give away the one thing that might protect him.'



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from FARSEER

SIMON BELISARIUS CAREFULLY unrolled the ancient parchment, smoothed the cracking vellum flat on the tabletop and placed a paperweight at each corner. Charts and starmaps already covered the desk and table of his large cabin. Like all Navigators he was in possession of hard copies of all the necessary astro-cartography. After all, you could never tell when the ancient machine spirits might become temperamental and turn against you, or when a datacore might fail.

Simon had been trained to bring his ship home even if every navigational system on it failed, and the charts were normally just one extra way of ensuring this. But this map was special. It was his pride and joy, albeit a very dangerous one.

The musty smell of the thing told how old it was. It had probably been copied and recopied since the founding of the Imperium, and probably in secret too, for this was one of those documents the Inquisition would burn a man for possessing.

Simon had always liked being party to forbidden secrets, providing they were not too forbidden, and he had always been fascinated by the relics of ancient days. And this map was something special – a chart of warp currents through the Cadian Gate running into the Eye of Terror. He might not even have recognised it for what it was when he came across it in the antiquarians had he not spent every spare moment in the libraries of Belisarius when he was younger.

He gave a wry shake of his head thinking about the pleasure he had got from that. He had not possessed much spare time for rummaging about during his childhood and youth. From the age of three years old he had spent a minimum of twelve waking hours in training. First it had been exercises to

discipline his body and mind – seven years of it. Next came seven years of higher learning – history, astronomy, various advanced mental disciplines and martial arts, all designed to strengthen his mind, his soul and his body for the rigours of his career. Then came the final seven years of studying the actual discipline of warp navigation, the ones that many did not even survive, let alone pass through. He did not want to think about those.

Instead he breathed deep of the stale scent of the scroll, and used the mnemonic recall techniques he had learned as a youth. Immediately he was back in the great library of Belisarius. He could picture the great painted ceiling one hundred metres overhead, the fresco showing the Emperor granting his charter to Mikael Belisarius, while his primarchs grinned down and all his defeated enemies gnashed their teeth in the background. In his mind's eye, Simon could visualise the massive cabinets of books, piled on top of each other so high that the ancient ancestral librarians needed ladders ten times their own height to reach the top volumes. He could almost touch the endless rows of leather-bound librams, and stick his fingers into the countless alcoves containing scrolls and star charts and aide memoires. He could remember the nooks and crannies, each with their tables of carved wood inlaid with leviathan ivory, where he had done his reading by the soft buttery light of a hovering glow-globe until the chimes of the monstrous clock tower in the west wing of the palace had told him it was time for sleep.

Once one of the librarians had told him that there were over a billion volumes in the library, a copy of almost every book released since the foundation of the Imperium and of millions of tomes printed or copied in the Dark Age that had preceded it. He had been told there were books in tongues no longer spoken, written in the glyphs of extinct races. He had been told that a copy of the logbook of every Navigator of House Belisarius that had ever been recovered was there too, along with all of those rutters captured or acquired by stealth from other Houses. He was not sure now that there really had been a billion books, but even if the librarian had been wrong there had been too many to catalogue or index. So much knowledge, he thought, gathered since the dawn of human

civilisation. Who knows what secrets we might find there, if only we knew where to look?

Such remembrance and speculation were getting him nowhere he realised and ended the exercise, bringing himself firmly back to the present. He needed to get to work. He studied the chart laid out before him. To anybody but another Navigator it would simply have looked like an abstract geometric swirl of lines, curves, circles and arcs all linking a myriad of coloured dots and marked with hieroglyphs and runes.

To the trained eye, it was a complex mnemonic pattern that showed the principle flow lines of the immaterium in and around the Cadian Gate. Its near twin, a chart displaying the local area, lay on the other table. On both, hazards and vortices were marked, and the various colours of line and surrounding inked backgrounds gave some clues as to the flow and texture of the immaterium.

Judging by the small scribe mark in the corner the information was several centuries out of date, but that did not matter too much. Currents and channels would have shifted but a little over that period unless marred by the most violent of warp storms. These things changed, but slowly, over millennia. Forces at play in the immaterium might temporarily obscure the channels but their essence would remain. If he could find an opening, he could use these routes.

He checked the chart of the Medusa system. It showed the fabric of space-time there had its flaws, as had every system. There were always points where it was easier to enter the immaterium and, more relevantly to his current problems, there were always approach vectors that made it easier to jump in certain directions.

Like any other great starship the *Star of Venam* was capable of punching a hole in the fabric of space-time and entering the warp from any place outside the deep gravity well of a planet. But such a brute force method required enormous amounts of energy and placed colossal strain on the ship's generators and power cores, and given how far they had to go, and how dangerous the journey was likely to be, Simon wanted to take no chances. Every small fraction of a decimal point he shifted the odds of success in their favour, the greater the probability of a safe return would be.

The Cadian Gate was the most difficult passage in the history of Navigation, a route fraught with peril and horror, the main pathway that the fleets of Chaos used to enter the Imperium. Like most people, under normal circumstances, Simon considered the sheer difficulty of the way a blessing, for it shielded the realms of mankind from their deadliest enemies better than a hundred battle fleets. Now the problem was reversed he did not find it quite such an attractive feature.

I wonder if the Chaos worshippers have Navigators, he wondered briefly? There was no record of it, but that did not mean it was not so. In a lifetime of travelling the galaxy Simon had come across many strange things, and seen that many of the most cherished beliefs of his people were not necessarily always true under every circumstance. There were Navigator Houses that had been expunged from the Imperial records but not from those of the *Navis Nobilitae*. Some of them had disappeared during the time of the Horus Heresy. It was possible they had gone over to the other side. These were dangerous thoughts, perilously close to heresy, so he dismissed them and returned to the task at hand.

He studied the chart of Medusa again, looking for the points where a jump off into the Eye of Terror would be easiest. That would take them closest to the entrance to the Cadian Vector, the great current of timeflow that swept in and out of the Cadian Gate, through gaps in the warp storms. If they timed things just right, if the current swept them in the proper direction, and if Simon managed the insertion of the vessel into the immaterium at exactly the correct time and place then timed their exit to perfection, there would be a chance of getting through. He did not want to think about the dangers of the return journey. The first priority was to get them to where the eldar wanted to go.

He checked his rutters for more information about Medusa. Inscribed in the complex rune-mathematical notation of his House, they contained what he had divined of the currents between the systems, the vector and intensity of the Astronomican at approved temporal intervals and the hazards to be avoided. If they survived the trip he would make similar notations about Belial. A second voyage was usually easier than a first because you had some idea of the hazards that lay

in wait. Of course, this information would also be damning evidence of heresy as far as the Inquisition was concerned. He forced himself back from that line of thought to contemplate the relatively safe jump from Medusa.

Simon laughed softly. He was dangerously close to what Karadoc had once called one of the Seven Great Errors of Navigation. He could almost hear the old man's dry, rustling voice whispering: never, ever assume that a voyage will be safe, boy. You can be approaching an entrance point you have used a thousand times, and a warp storm might arise. Or a temporal vortex might spring up. Or the daemons of the warp, for their own unguessable reasons, might suddenly decide that your ship looks like a tasty morsel. There's no way to tell what might happen, even on the most routine of trips. You must be constantly alert and aware. To be otherwise is to court destruction, for you and your ship.

But then I am already doing that, thought Simon, wondering what his old tutor would have thought of this mad trip. He would have told me not to question my oaths and to see my ship safely home, he answered himself.

In his mind he pictured the chart of the Medusa system and its exit points, and one last time began the unimaginably complex calculations needed to throw the ship through the immaterium between them.

He was torn between two routes. His current choice took point alpha null twelve, and rotated the ship thirty degrees to the galactic plane twelve pulses of the Astronomican after insertion, so that they should catch the main current. Alternatively, insertion at omega delta five with a twenty-nine point two rotation would achieve the same thing but with a possible great decrease in time of transit. The system chart showed turbulence at the entry point there though, and a permanent vortex that you could fall into if you were not careful. Still, the turbulence could be used to give the ship more velocity if caught just right.

It was the sort of showy manoeuvre that would have appealed to Simon under normal circumstances but right now he decided that it would be better to err on the side of caution. He would avoid temptation and stick with his original plan.

He touched one of the control runes on his view screen and called up the ship's present course. Perfect. The ship would reach the jump point within twelve hours on its present course. The time saved by using an easier breakthrough point would more than make up for the extra time spent in real space. There seemed little to do but rest now, for he would have little enough time to do so once they entered the immaterium.

Another shiver of excitement passed through him. Despite the number of jumps he had made, they never ceased to thrill him. Soon he would have a command deck beneath his feet and his pineal eye would gaze out on the warp. The life of his ship and everybody in it would rest in his own hands. He would be the sole master of his destiny. It would be down to his skill whether the ship made it to port or foundered with all hands. Perhaps only warriors on a battlefield could feel a similar excitement, as they faced the turbulence of war. There was no feeling to quite compare with it, and the prospect filled him with excitement even as it also filled him with dread.

A KNOCK ON the door of his chamber roused Simon from a doze. Absent mindedly he checked his chronometer. It was not yet time for the helmsman to rouse him. There were still several hours to go before they reached the insertion point. What could be going on?

Like all good Navigators, he had a basic feel for any ship he was on. He sensed nothing different around him. The vibration of the floor had not altered, nor had the basic sounds of the vessel. The air moved at the same rate through the ducts. No alarm bells were sounding. No warning lights flashed. This could hardly be an emergency. What could it be?

He pulled on his tunic and boots and stalked over to the door. As always, from force of habit, he had set the doorseal so that it could not be opened from outside. 'Who is it?'

'I wish to speak with you, human,' said a faintly familiar voice. Even through the duralloy Simon could tell it was an alien. He slammed the door-release rune with his palm. It whooshed open to reveal the female eldar.

'Yes,' said Simon. 'What do you want?'

'I wish to talk to you about the voyage we are about to make. There may be trouble.'

'So you're expecting enemies to show up?'

'Perhaps.'

'Would you care to tell me who?'

'Auric tells me that there is a vanishingly small possibility that other eldar might try to intercept us.'

'He's not showing his usual certainty there then.'

'Auric is certain of nothing. He deals in probabilities, nothing more.'

'You're putting me to a lot of trouble and risking a lot of men's lives on his probabilities.'

'Yes. Auric judges it worth the risk. I concur.'

'Who might try and intercept us?'

'Corsairs.'

'Eldar pirates?'

'There are no eldar pirates.'

'I have fought many vessels who did a good impersonation of it then.'

'Those were not true eldar. They were our decadent kin.'

Simon had heard that the eldar might be divided into two or more factions but this was the first time the information had ever come directly from one of them. He made a mental note for the sake of his log. 'Their boarding parties looked like eldar to me.'

'They share our blood, but nothing more. They fell into darkness long ago.'

'Tell me more.'

'That is not the reason I came here.'

'What do you want?'

'Tell me about the procedures you use to make a warp jump.'

'Surely you must have made one before?'

'Imagine I have not.'

'You must have made one to get to Medusa. It is not exactly an eldar home world.'

'We did not.'

'You're telling me that there is a secret colony of eldar there that the Imperium knows nothing about?' Simon let his disbelief show in his voice. Did this alien madwoman seriously

expect him to believe she had not used a ship to reach Medusa?

'I am telling you nothing. You will tell me about the warp jump.'

'I will tell you everything I am bound by oath not to reveal.'

'That will be sufficient.'

'I will tell you providing you tell me why you want to know.'

'It is not something of which I wish to speak.'

'Tell me anyway.'

'Or what?'

'Or I will reconsider my decision to tell you about our trip. I am bound by my House's promise to take you where you want to go. It says nothing about talking to you on the way.'

At first Simon thought the eldar woman was angry, her eyes widened and a strange mewling sound like a cat might make came from her mouth. After a few seconds he realised she was laughing.

'Very well. It seems I must share something with you. I wish to know because I have never made such a jump before and it makes me nervous.'

It suddenly struck Simon that the prospect of the jump made her more than nervous. If she had been a human, he realised, he would have thought her terrified. Why?

Why not? Many people were. Ships got lost in space and time and never returned. Many and varied were the perils of the warp, and the Navigator Houses did not share all of them with their potential clients. Their secrecy did nothing to dispel those fears. And if truth be told, the fears were more than justified. Simon knew what was out there, and there were times when it terrified even him. The risk was more than just to a man's body when he passed through the immaterium. There was a very real risk to the soul also.

'You are very quiet,' said the eldar woman.

'I am considering where to begin.'

'More likely considering what you think you can get away with telling me.'

'I would never have guessed you such a good judge of character. Would that I were such a good judge of yours.'

Athenys laughed again. This time she even smiled. Simon might have warmed to her a little but he was suspicious of her

now. He suspected some subtle manipulation or probing. She seemed to be able to read this from his face, for her smile vanished as if a switch had been thrown. 'I suspect that you are a better judge than you might imagine.'

Simon shrugged. 'Think of our ship as a vessel which sails on two seas. It passes through normal space, where we are currently, and it can enter the immaterium.'

'The immaterium?'

'The warp, the empyrean, whatever you want to call it. It is a dimension outside our reality, a place more or less of pure energy, where space and time as we understand them no longer exist.'

'Such things are known to us.'

'Then you understand that being able to enter this place has its uses. By passing outside our own space we can ride the currents of the warp and re-enter our own space light years distant.'

'Yes. Such things were known in the infancy of my people.'

Simon felt a flicker of annoyance. The eldar seemed so distant and superior. Still, just the way she spoke was giving him valuable insights. He decided to push on, and note down what she said in his rutter. After all, it would not hurt for humanity to understand this ancient race a little better. At least he hoped not.

'Then you understand why my people make use of it. Why do yours not?'

'There are dangers...'

'Yes. There are always dangers. The warp is a place where normal senses do not work, the sight of which can drive men mad. Finding a path through it is not easy.'

'The sight of it has not driven you mad?'

'That is because my people are different from the normal run of humanity. Over millennia we have adapted to the warp. My pineal eye can gaze upon the immaterium and comprehend it. My brain has been altered so that I can make sense of what I see.'

'Has been altered?'

Simon flinched. With unerring accuracy she had put her finger on one of the sore spots of the Navis Nobilitae. 'Perhaps we evolved to be what we are. Perhaps in the dim, distant past

we were changed to enable us to perform our functions, in the same way it is said, that the Emperor altered the primarchs.'

Simon knew that what he was saying was very close to what the Inquisition would call heresy. Nonetheless, it was common enough talk in the sealed Houses of the Navigators.

'I thought your Houses predated the appearance of the Emperor and his primarchs. So at least my people say.'

'Perhaps – the origins of our guilds are lost in the mists of time. We only know that in the early days, men used many means to navigate the warp. Drugs, psychic powers, machines, all were tried with varying degrees of success.'

'And varying degrees of failure.' Once more that mocking smile appeared on her lips.

'Such is implicit in having any degree of success less than perfection.'

'And your people represent the best attempts of mankind to master the dangers of the warp.' The level of mockery had deepened. Do they really feel such contempt for us, Simon wondered? Are we really just brutish barbarians to them?

'We have been successful in our task for more than ten thousand years.'

'That you have performed such a function so long is not to be denied. But how many of your ships have been lost? How many never return? How many are taken by those who wait beyond?'

Another reason for her attitude suddenly became clear to Simon. She was terrified and covering it with this display of subtle aggression. He sensed an opening, decided to probe.

'If you know of a better way, why then do you not take it?'

'There is no other way, let alone a better way.'

'Why not? If your starships are so much superior to ours why not have one of them take you?'

'It is not that simple. Our starships cannot go to some of the places where yours can.'

'That sounds unlikely. Surely such a superior race could build void screens and warp shields just as good as ours, if not better. Surely a people so ancient must have mastered the secrets of astrogation better than our poor intellects ever could.'

'There is no need to sneer. We travelled between the stars while your people were still swinging from trees.'

'Then it seems improbable to me that such an advanced race could need our help for anything,' said Simon, making his tone as cold as he could. 'Unless of course you are criminals and your people will not help you.'

'It is not that. We do not use the warp as you call it because there are things in the warp that hunger for us. Our word for what you call the warp is *sha'eil*. Translated literally it means place of daemons – hell.'

Simon closed his mouth with a snap. He was not surprised that she knew this but it still felt wrong to him that anybody outside the Navis Nobilitae and the select few of the upper echelons of the Imperium should understand that. There were entities that lurked in the warp, malign entities, daemons for want of a better name, and they had caused the destruction of many a ship.

'They hunger for everybody,' he said.

She shook her head very slowly and then glanced at him directly. Her expression told him that he had missed something or did not understand something nearly as well as he thought he did.

'They hunger for us in particular.'

'You and Auric in particular, or the eldar people?'

'Both. You see there is something about us that attracts them, which drives them insane with lust to devour us. That is why we are taking a terrible risk travelling with you.'

'Then you are putting all of us at terrible risk. The entities of the warp can swallow an entire starship at a gulp. And there are worse things – if they should break through our screens...'

Simon shivered. He was all too familiar with the tales of ghost ships, whose crews had fallen prey to a daemon of the warp, who were stalked through their ships by the possessed corpses of their friends and killed in the most unspeakable ways until only a few gibbering, insane survivors were left to die shrieking when their craft emerged from the immaterium.

He knew that no matter how potent the shields of his vessel, and how thick its armoured hull, there was always the chance of a breach, and, if that should happen, a dreadful death. Anything that increased the number of attempts to penetrate the hull, and therefore increased the chance of disaster, was to be avoided. Suddenly, he thought of all those

ships that had responded to the ancient golden argosies that had never returned. Was it possible he was close to divining the reason?

‘What you are telling me is not good,’ he said eventually.

‘We want you to be aware of what might happen. Auric would do his best to shield you, but there is always the chance that his attempts might backfire.’

‘You can thank Auric for me. Tell him I will do my best to save you from the daemons that might come for you.’

She rose to go in one smooth sinuous movement. When she turned in the doorway and gave him a sinister smile, he knew that she had saved the worst for last.

‘It is not just for us they will come,’ she said. ‘It is for your friend, Janus Darke.’

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