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PATH OF THE WARRIOR

A Path of the Eldar novel

By Gav Thorpe

The ancient eldar are a mysterious race, each devoting their life to a chosen path which will guide their actions and decide their fate. Korlandril abandons peace for the Path of the Warrior. He becomes a Striking Scorpion, a deadly fighter skilled in the art of close-quarter combat. But the further Korlandril travels down this path, the closer he gets to losing his identity and becoming an avatar of war.

About the Author

Prior to becoming a freelance writer, Gav Thorpe worked for Games Workshop as lead background designer, overseeing and contributing to the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 worlds. He has written numerous novels and short stories set in the fictional worlds of Games Workshop, including the Time of Legends 'The Sundering' series, the seminal Dark Angels novel *Angels of Darkness*, and the Last Chancers omnibus. He lives in Nottingham, UK, with his mechanical hamster, Dennis.



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A SMALL BOX had been left at Korlandril's door, a simple white cube no larger than the palm of his hand without wrapping or message. Korlandril bent his knee to pick it up and as his fingers neared the package he felt a sensation of warmth. He pulled back slightly, surprised by the feeling. It felt like Thirianna, though there was something else mixed in with the strange hint of presence that lingered around the gift.

He picked it up and opened the lid.

Inside was a rune, shaped from silvery-grey wishstone. He recognised it immediately, the symbol of the Dire Avengers. It was the martial discipline of this warrior Aspect that had merged with the tender thoughts of Thirianna. Holding it in his palm, Korlandril concentrated, teasing the thought-stream with which the rune had been imbued.

He felt momentary sadness and longing; regret at their parting; pride in his actions. Most of all, he felt the sensation of understanding. Korlandril divined the message. Thirianna herself had once heard her call of Khaine and supported him on his current path. Running a finger along the bars of the rune, Korlandril knew she had taken it as a souvenir from her armour, and now she had passed it to him as a token of her friendship, one that he would be able to understand from one warrior to another.

He closed his fingers around the gift and smiled.

IT WAS THE FIRST time Korlandril had suited up with the purpose of true battle. Kenainath stood before him with a shallow bowl, a sliver of a blade in his right hand.

‘We give of our blood, as Khaine’s call roars around us, calling us to war.’

The exarch took the knife and made a cut in the palm of Korlandril’s right hand, allowing the lifeblood of the warrior to drip into the bowl and mingle with that of the other Striking Scorpions.

Kenainath then moved around the squad, in turn painting the rune of the Striking Scorpion upon their foreheads. Korlandril was the last and watched with some trepidation as he saw his companions’ eyes glaze over, their muscles twitch and their lips curl back from their teeth in snarls.

Then he felt the blood upon his own skin. It felt like the exarch was carving the rune into his flesh with a fiery brand, the pain flaring in Korlandril’s mind. The pain turned to anger, welling up from deep within him. The anger drew on the deep-seated frustrations and humiliations Korlandril had put aside, wakening those forgotten emotions.

Quivering, Korlandril did nothing as the war-mask erupted from within him. His blood thundered in his ears and the cut on his palm burned sharply. The air crackled with life and his skin crawled with energy. Like an obscene birth the warrior spirit of Korlandril burst forth through the barriers he had erected, seething and hungry.

The voice of Kenainath cut through Korlandril’s senses.

‘The peace is broken, harmony falls to discord, only war remains.’

Korlandril began the ritual of arming, following each step without thought. It was as if he walked towards a burning fire and was preparing to pass through the flames. He steadied himself mentally, concentrating on the exarch’s mantra.

‘Now we clothe ourselves, with bloody Khaine’s own raiment, as a warrior.’

Korlandril could not fight back his excitement. This was the moment he had dreaded and longed-for since completing his training. He felt a moment of shame at his own bloodthirst but the regret soon disappeared as he continued to armour himself.

‘In Khaine’s iron skin, we clad ourselves for battle, while fire burns within.’

Like no other time, the armour felt a part of Korlandril. He was not simply putting on his suit, he was becoming himself. More than putting on plates of armour, he was stripping away the pretensions of civilisation he used to conceal his wrath.

‘The spirit of Khaine, from which we draw our resolve, strengthens within us.’

The rune upon his forehead was now icy cold. Its freezing touch spread through him, until it had almost stilled his heart. With its chilling fingers it brushed away his remorse and pity, crushed his compassion and guilt.

‘War comes upon us, we must bear its dark burden, upon our shoulders.’

Khaine’s iron skin, indeed! Korlandril felt strong, stronger than ever before. He flexed his shoulders and bunched the muscles in his chest, the armour tightening around him, comforting in its hard embrace.

‘We stand before Khaine, unyielding in our calling, free of doubt and fear.’

Korlandril’s heart was a drumbeat, endless, martial, driving him onwards. He curled his fingers into fists and felt the power in his arms. It felt good, to be so powerful, to be so alive.

‘We do not flee death, we walk in the shade of Khaine, proud and unafraid.’

The armour made a creaking noise as it adjusted further. As it knitted together he felt it bonding to him, infusing his spirit with its own. He heard panting, dimly realising that it was he that was breathing so quickly. He closed his eyes and saw the fire-eyed apparition of his anger swirling around him, encasing him as surely as the armoured suit.

‘We strike from the dark, as swift as the scorpion, with a deadly touch.’

Korlandril felt his hands empty, and longed for the feeling of sword and pistol in his fingers. He flexed his gauntleted hands in anticipation.

‘See not with the eyes, but allow anger to flow, let Khaine’s gift guide you.’

As the darkness of the helm enveloped Korlandril, he was frozen in space and time. The universe paused, holding its breath. He stood there in the darkness, savouring it, remembering with scorn the fear he had felt when first he had come to this place. It had made him whole.

Something was placed in his right hand and he gripped it gently. Sharp blades hummed into momentary life and then fell still. With a click, something was affixed to the relay cord on his left arm and his hand curled around a pistol’s grip. Thirianna’s rune hung from it, a small decoration of his own.

Then his waystone, sliding into place upon his chest, guarding his spirit against damnation. It was his last armour, his true protection against the thing he was becoming, the creature he wanted to become.

The darkness was inside him and outside him, the fiery eyes staring directly out of his head. He had known all along the shadowy figure he had been fighting, but only now truly saw it for what it was. It was himself he had fought. He had strained against the urges and desires that lingered within his heart. He had tried so hard to quell the feelings of rage, but he had fought out of ignorance.

The darkness was no more, save that Korlandril had his eyes closed. He opened them and looked out at the world with a fresh view through the ruby-tinted lenses of his helmet.

He took a crouched step forward, easing into his fighting stance. No longer was he a thing of flesh and blood, a mortal being filled with falsehood and crude passions. He was a Warrior. He was part of the Bloody-Handed God, an Aspect of Kaela Mensha Khaine.

Korlandril was no more.

In his place stood a Striking Scorpion of the Deadly Shadow.

THE MAIN GALLERY of the warship was an immense hall, vaulted with rib-like structures that split into tall, narrow

doorways leading to the side chambers. Flickers of energy danced along the wraithbone core, merging with hidden psychic circuitry behind walls of shifting, mottled blue and green. The arched ship chambers rang with booted feet, the keen sound of blades cutting air and now and then an explosion or blaze of laser fire as weapons were tested. Warriors from Alaitoc's dozens of Aspect shrines practised their rituals, each in a separate hall that branched from the main arterial passage, the mantras of the exarchs ringing from the high ceilings in a multi-layered symphony of war.

Korlandril stood in line with the other Deadly Shadow warriors, hearing only the voice of Kenainath and the beating of his heart.

The Avatar was aboard. The Bloody-Handed God walked among them. Korlandril could feel its presence lingering on the edge of his senses. It quickened his pulse and filled every motion with greater energy. His mind was fixed upon a single goal – the annihilation of the orks despoiling Eileniliesh.

The thought of battle filled him with expectation. For all that his rituals as a warrior allowed him to separate his anger from his daily life, it was in war that he would find release. The prospect of bloodshed, the visceral conflict of life and death, thrilled Korlandril. It promised an intoxication even greater and fulfilling than the completion of a sculpture or the climax of a Dreaming, though he could remember these previous victories only dimly.

When the exercises were complete, Kenainath dismissed them. Korlandril hesitated, unsure what to do next. Elissanadrin approached him, removing her helmet. Korlandril's eyes were immediately drawn to the rune of dried blood on her forehead. His ruby-tinted gaze moved to her eyes and he saw the dispassionate stare he now recognised as the war-mask.

Hesitantly, self-consciously, Korlandril took off his helmet, fearful that this act would somehow remove his war-mask. Un-helmeted, he felt no different. The rune upon his skin bound him to his mental state, an anchor of anger.

He followed the others as they left the chamber and filed along the central nave of the starship, heading towards the stern. Now and then a glimmer of light would pass along the translucent walls, a bright speck amongst pale orange and yellow shimmering. There was no infinity circuit on the ship, though its wraithbone core pulsed gently with psychic energy, playing upon the edge of Korlandril's senses. It was almost overwhelmed with the far sharper, iron-and-blood-tainted presence of the Avatar.

Other squads were likewise assembling, coming together along the arteries of the battleship on foot and skimming platforms: Dark Reapers in their heavy black armour and vane-flanked helmets; bone-coloured Howling Banshees, the manes of their helmets flying with psychic energy; and many Dire Avengers, blue-clad, their exarchs wearing bright yellow and white gonfalons on their backpacks. And many others beside, each representing a facet of the War God; each dedicated to a particular fighting style, brought together in a harmony of destruction.

'It will be eight cycles before we reach Eileniliesh,' said Min, stopping in his enthusiastic stride to allow Elissanadrin and Korlandril to catch him.

It seemed such a long time to wait before the bloodletting would begin, but Korlandril knew that such a journey was short compared to most. He was agitated by the inactivity, wondering how he would make the time pass.

'I see the hunger in you,' said Min, baring his teeth in a grin. 'It will come soon enough, do not fret.'

'How many times have you fought?' asked Korlandril.

'This will be my thirteenth expedition,' said Elissanadrin.

'Twenty,' replied Min.

Korlandril looked around at Arhulesh, who had been trailing behind them a little way, with Bechareth a few more paces even further back.

'Two,' said Arhulesh. 'Including this one.'

Korlandril laughed, and then fell silent, taken aback that he could show humour. Arhulesh growled.

‘You gave the impression you were more experienced,’ said Korlandril. ‘I did not realise you were such a babe-at-arms.’

‘It is you that is the adolescent, newcomer,’ said Arhulesh. ‘Feverish to taste that forbidden pleasure, yet as hesitant as an Iybraesillian maiden on coming to full flower. Be assured that nobody expects you to perform perfectly the first time.’

‘My first foray into fleshly pleasures met with success and much gratitude from my partner,’ said Korlandril. ‘I’ve no fear my battle-virginity will hold me back.’

‘For truth, I am sure you practised equally before both,’ laughed Arhulesh.

They walked on for a while longer, the chatter of other squads around them.

‘I am hungry,’ said Korlandril, even as he realised the emptiness gnawing at him. He felt like an engine that had burned most of its fuel.

‘We all are,’ said Min. ‘Tis a strange thing, for a cycle from now your stomach will feel like an endless knot and you won’t want a morsel. Eat as much as you can, while you can. Your body burns energy much faster with your war-mask on, it’s important to keep up your energy levels.’

Korlandril nodded in understanding.

Their journey took them past vast hangars where the dark shapes of scout ships loomed in shadow. A few were empty, their ranger pilots escorting the warship through the winding half-real maze of the webway. Other halls were also dormant: places where tanks and other war machines would usually be transported. There was to be no such support on this mission – this was a quick strike to destroy the ork threat in its infancy. Only the Aspect Warriors had been called, the farseers judging the situation not so severe that the citizen militia – the Guardians – needed to be mobilised.

Min led them to an eatery where hundreds of Aspect Warriors were sat at long tables, while others moved busily around the circular counters, helping themselves to the food on offer. A force dome glittered overhead, showing a view of

the webway. A curving tunnel of energy enveloped the ship with solid walls of rippling colours, streaked through with flashes of star-lit sky. Engineered from the stuff of warp space, the webway burrowed between and through the immaterial and material worlds, part of both but separate from each.

Now and then they passed a branching route, the webway bifurcating through hanging gateways of gold and wraithbone, inscribed with runes channelling and shaping the psychic energy of warp space. There were other features: small tunnels that cut out great loops of the main channels; huge coils of raw wraithbone wrapped around the insubstantial tunnel in places the only evidence of repairs; occasionally the force walls folded and buckled, rippling with light as some malign creature of warp space intersected with the webway and was thrown back by the psychic wards.

There were no other ships to be seen, the route to Eileniliesh had been cleared by the rangers to allow passage for the large warship.

Thinking about the daemons and other creatures loitering close at hand made Korlandril uneasy. The webway was far safer than open warp space, but it unnerved him to imagine the immaterial beasts held at bay by the translucent walls of energy. He pulled his eyes away and looked at the Aspect Warriors gathered in their squads across the circular hall.

‘Why does the Deadly Shadow have so few warriors compared to the other shrines?’

‘Kenainath will only take on a single pupil at a time,’ explained Elissanadrin. ‘It is fortunate for you that he had no acolyte at the time of your... dilemma. I would not have been able to bring you to him had it been otherwise.’

Korlandril also noticed that most of the other shrines had their exarchs with them. Kenainath, as far as Korlandril knew, had remained in the Deadly Shadow’s allotted shrine-hall. He spied another group of Striking Scorpions, more than twenty of them. Their exarch sat at the head of the table. A long two-edged chainsword hung on a sling across his back.

‘The Fall of Deadly Rain,’ said Arhulesh. ‘That is the exarch, Aranarha. We should pay our respects.’

The exarch looked up at them as they approached; eyes a deep blue, his features smooth like one of Korlandril’s sculptures. His hair was cropped barbarically short, save for two long braids that fell across his face.

‘The children of Kenainath, a welcome greeting, and a new member with them!’ the exarch said with a lopsided grin. He stood up and gave a perfunctory bow towards Korlandril.

‘My honour,’ said Korlandril, returning the bow. ‘I am Korlandril.’

‘And now a Deadly Shadow, hiding in your shrine, with Kenainath’s dark whispers. Why did you not come to me, my door was open, and I am far less fearsome.’

‘I–’ began Korlandril, but Elissanadrin cut him off.

‘It was I that brought Korlandril to the Deadly Shadow, as was right,’ she said forcefully. ‘Kenainath teaches us well.’

‘I do not dispute that fact, but that is not all, there is more to life than war.’

‘He allows us to learn those lessons for ourselves,’ countered Min.

Aranarha smiled pleasantly and waved for them to sit themselves down.

‘You have come here on your own, without your exarch, so enjoy our company.’

Korlandril glanced at the others for guidance.

‘Here is as good a place as any,’ said Arhulesh, taking a place between two of the Fall of Deadly Rain warriors. He helped himself to a few morsels from the plate of the warrior to his left. ‘We have little else to do.’

‘We will join you shortly,’ said Elissanadrin, turning towards the nearest food counter. Korlandril trailed slightly behind her, bemused by the exchange.

‘I detect some enmity,’ he said. ‘Do you have some issue with Aranarha?’

Elissanadrin shook her head, taking an oval platter from beneath the heated food station. With dextrous flicks of her

wrist, she transferred a pile of steaming multi-coloured grains to the plate. Korlandril took up a bowl and wandered to a stand of low bushes growing from a patch of spongy floor. With quick fingers, he twisted the berries from the living branches and then moved on to a small pool where fragrant blossoms floated on the surface. He plucked a couple of blooms and scattered their petals across his food.

‘Aranarha and Kenainath have been rivals for some time, but there is no hostility there,’ said Elissanadrin, as Korlandril used a slender knife to fillet slices of meat from the carcass of a shadow-horn. ‘Kenainath is old – very old – and he does not approve of Aranarha’s methods sometimes. But we are all warriors here, and that is a bond that cannot be broken. For all their differences, they still respect each other.’

‘But that does not explain your tone and actions,’ said Korlandril, filling his dish with a generous helping of split seeds and twists of angel-resin. He was ravenous and had to stop himself over-filling the platter.

‘Kenainath sees his entrapment as an exarch as a curse, but Aranarha takes it as a blessing. The older would rather have no pupils, the younger proselytises his cult, actively recruiting new warriors.’

‘Why does Kenainath want to be free of pupils? Is he that disdainful of us?’

Elissanadrin gave Korlandril a sharp look.

‘If Kenainath had no pupils, it would mean that there is no need of him – that others were free from the taint of Khaine’s Gift. If you think that Kenainath disdains you, then you see something I do not. Perhaps it is merely a reflection of some residual shame you feel.’

‘He does not seem to care too much about me,’ Korlandril said with a shrug. ‘Perhaps I confuse indifference for disdain.’

‘Kenainath digs deep, reaching into the very heart of what takes you to him.’ Elissanadrin kept her voice quiet as they moved back towards the table with the other Striking Scorpions. ‘Aranarha teaches the rituals en masse, taking no

personal interest in each warrior. Which of the two do you think cares more?’

Korlandril considered this as he sat down to eat with the rest. Soon his plate was empty and he returned for more. And then a third helping.

‘This fire indeed burns brightly, a feast of Kurnous, would not satiate his need,’ remarked Arandarha.

Korlandril looked down at the food piled in front of him. He saw no wrong in it. Min had warned him to eat as much as he could while he felt hungry.

‘It would be better that I do not go to my first battle weak with hunger,’ he said, before setting to his latest course with relish.

‘At least our armour is polymorphic,’ laughed Arhulesh. ‘It won’t feel any tighter!’

Korlandril grinned and reached for a goblet of spiced lodefruit juice. He raised it in toast to Arhulesh and downed its contents in a long gulp. Smacking his lips, he thudded the goblet back onto the table.

‘If battle tastes so sweet, the greater banquet is yet to come!’ he declared.

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