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ORION

THE VAULTS OF WINTER



DARIUS HINKS

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ORION: THE VAULTS OF WINTER

Darius Hinks

At the heart the wood elf kingdom of Athel Loren, the forest-king Orion slumbers through the winter months to be reborn each spring and resume his arboreal throne. However, this year he awakens to discover a foul canker at the core of his eternal spirit – he has been cursed, though by whom and for what reason he does not know. In the grip of a furious rage he leads the asrai to war, but as the corruption spreads to the woodland realm around him, he feels his power waning and must rely upon his loyal subjects to help him unmask the traitor within their ranks.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks's first novel, *Warrior Priest*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar award for best newcomer. Since then he has carved a bloody swathe through the Warhammer World in works such as *Island of Blood*, *Sigvald* and *Razumov's Tomb*. Recently, he has ventured into the Warhammer 40,000 universe with the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*. He plans to return to the grim darkness of the far future after he has finished telling the tale of the forest god Orion.

Orion: The Vaults of Winter can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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Orion became aware of sound, before anything else: hundreds of voices, chanting his name. They were singing glorious ballads and long, rousing epics, describing his past in glorious, extravagant detail.

He smiled in the darkness.

As their adoring syllables caressed his formless limbs he felt them start to solidify and grow. He sighed with pleasure as broad muscles spread across his chest and back. Tendons snaked around them like ivy, and his spine stretched and grew, creaking like old bark as it snapped into place. He felt his scalp burst as hard, shoot-like horns slid through his skin, spiralling up from his head to form wide, tangled antlers. For a long time, centuries it seemed, he revelled in the sheer visceral ecstasy of birth, stretching and flexing his limbs.

Then, as the coils of his brain formed and ignited, he remembered another name: Sephian. Orion's pleasure faltered as he recalled a vague sense of shame. Had there had been some suggestion of weakness, some implication that he was not fit to rule?

As Orion's features tumbled into position he opened his mouth and howled in defiance. He called out with such animal rage that his dark, arboreal womb shook and splintered around him. The chorus of voices faltered and the music ceased, but still Orion roared. 'I will show you power!' he bellowed, railing against his unknown accusers. His freshly formed body shook with wrath.

'I will teach you to kneel!'

As Orion roared, his fury spiralled. The sound of splintering wood merged with another noise. At first Orion thought it was his own booming roar, but soon he realised it was hounds, dozens of them, joining their wild clamour to his. It was a fierce, hungry sound that filled his quickening heart with joy.

'Orion,' said a voice in his ear. The words were soft, but somehow managed to drown out the din he had raised in the dark.

He turned to one side, delighting in the feel of his thick, tendon-wrapped neck.

His roar faltered and ceased as he looked into the eyes of a god.

The shape beside him was incandescent: a mantle of shifting stars, draped around a shimmering face. Orion flinched and closed his eyes, blinded by the light. 'Isha,' he said in a low growl.

'The forest is us,' said the voice. 'We are the forest. You have nothing to prove.'

Orion tried to look again and found the stars were already fading, revealing a face less celestial, but no less beautiful. Before he closed his eyes, he glimpsed pale, flawless skin, high, aristocratic cheekbones and a sad, distant gaze.

'Ariel,' he said, correcting himself. Even meeting her eyes so briefly was enough to send his thoughts tumbling into the past. Ariel. His queen. In an instant he saw all the long centuries they had shared. He saw a passion that had spanned thousands of years,

born of innocent youth. Their love had so intoxicated them that they embarked on an adventure neither of them understood. As he took her hand, so familiar and dear, Orion remembered the true weight of his crown. Ariel's immortality was bound to the forest. Without these ancient trees, she could not exist. If he failed her, if he lacked the power to enforce her rule, she would die. He felt his pulse beginning to pound as his fury returned but, as he opened his mouth to roar, Ariel silenced him with a soft, lingering kiss.

For a second, Orion resisted, torn between lust and a desire to answer the baying of the hounds; then he threw his arms around her, abandoning himself to a new kind of ecstasy.

For a long time Orion forgot everything beyond the darkness and Ariel, but finally, as their passion faded, he realised that the voices outside had returned and multiplied. Hundreds were chanting in unison now, their voices as wild and unhinged as spring itself. Orion knew what was waiting for him, beyond the dark, and his newborn flesh tingled with anticipation. He was old and new; a mewling pup and wizened crone. He had lived for thousands of years and he was about to be born for the first time.

As the chorus spiralled into a rousing crescendo, Orion felt Ariel take his hand and lead him forwards. At first they were stepping through the heavens. Orion looked down and saw his hooves, treading lightly across the cosmos. Comets and stars folded in his wake as he followed Ariel in a celestial dance. Then he felt ground beneath his hooves, a soft, pungent carpet of rotting leaves that oozed and squelched beneath the weight of his mortal flesh. As they walked, Orion saw light pouring in through a hole in the void: an enormous gateway that allowed the morning to wash over him, bathing his body in warmth and light. The sensations felt utterly new and Orion sighed with pleasure, turning to see Ariel at his side. As the darkness fell away, he saw that his queen was an impossible beauty: a mixture of warm, mortal flesh and glimmering insubstantiality. She was naked, but her hair trailed around her in such a bewildering web of gold and silver that it was impossible to make out her true form. He noticed two tall shapes rising up from her shoulder blades and realised that they were the fluttering, tawny wings of a hawk moth. She caught his eye and gave him a shy smile, before nodding at the archway ahead of them.

Orion followed the direction of her gaze and saw figures moving through the glare, framed by the archway. He felt a rush of impatience and hurried forwards, dragging Ariel after him.

She laughed, softly, squeezing his hand as they stumbled out into the light.

The music ceased and silence descended, broken only by the sound of Ariel, laughing quietly.

For a second, Orion was blinded by a crimson sunrise. He grunted in confusion, holding his hands up before his face. Then his eyes grew accustomed to the bloody glare and he saw that they were standing on a wide, grassy dais, at the centre of a circular clearing, surrounded on all sides by enormous oak trees. The dawn light was bleeding through the branches, reaching across the lawn and washing over hundreds of nobles. The highborn of the forest were spread out around the dais, standing beside rows of scented balefires.

The flames went untended as the asrai stared up at the beings they had summoned.

Orion began to understand Ariel's mirth as he surveyed his subjects.

They were terrified.

Every single face was white with fear. The lords and ladies were draped in their most beautiful spring finery: robes of the palest lemon and dresses the colour of new-sprung leaves that flapped and drifted in the morning breeze. Their trailing locks were plaited with bluebells and their wooden, splinter-like crowns blazed crimson with the fire of the rising sun. But, despite all of this, they resembled nothing more than quaking vermin, cornered by a hound.

Orion started to laugh. He was delighted to find that his voice was a rolling, powerful roar that caused the asrai to cower even further away from him. Some dropped to their knees and all averted their gaze. As his body shook with the pleasure of being alive, Orion looked down at himself. The memory of Sephian's shredded, bloody skin faded as he saw what he had become. His body looked as though it had been carved from the tallest, most venerable oak in the forest. His hindquarters were broad and powerful and ended in enormous, ridged hooves. His chest was clad in thick, angular muscles and his whole body was tinged a beautiful lichen green. He looked back and saw that he and Ariel had emerged from an oak that towered over the others. Its shape was hard to define and it seemed to shift from his gaze, as though it were not entirely enamoured of the material realm. Orion knew which tree he was looking at and suddenly he felt all the glory and power of his new life. He let go of Ariel's hand, raised his fists to the fading winter's light and howled.

As Orion's cry echoed around the forest, the balefires guttered and danced and a fierce breeze struck up from nowhere, sending several of the asrai stumbling to their knees. The roar swelled in volume and Orion realised he did not wish it to ever stop: he would drive the world to its knees with one, endless, life-affirming howl. As he filled the forest with noise, Orion felt his heart pound with a nameless, wonderful fury.

'Listen,' said a voice in his mind. The words were no more than a whisper, but they cut through Orion's cry and caused him to pause. He recognised the gentle tones and ceased his cry, turning to see that Ariel was still smiling at him.

'They are welcoming us,' she said.

Orion looked back at the cowering asrai and realised that one of them was reciting some kind of poem. He was a pale, delicate-looking youth, dressed in worn, rust-coloured leather. The name Khoron Belidae popped into Orion's mind and he felt that this was someone he disliked; an artist of some kind, whose florid, flamboyant tone was already starting to irritate him.

'Bidden but never bound,' recited the fey-looking noble, 'we implore thee, our most sacred mirrors of Kurnous and Isha, that thou seest the loyalty in our bosom and that thou seest the hunger in our souls and that thou seest the joy in our welcome and that thou seest the blessing in our gifts. Both mortal and divine, we beg that you deem us worthy; that you abjure the mystical realm and, for a brief season of...'

Orion shook his head at the ridiculous, pompous youth, so clearly in love with his own voice. He pictured himself in simpler times, racing through the trees with his young lover at

his side. There had been no elaborate rituals then; no nauseating, tousle-haired poets. 'How did we get *here*?' he said, turning to Ariel with a bemused expression.

'That's what you always say,' she replied, with another gentle laugh.