



WARHAMMER

AGE OF SIGMAR

A STORY OF THE MORTAL REALMS

PANTHEON

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PANTHEON

Guy Haley

There was a lantern in the skies over Azyr – shining Sigendil, the High Star of Azyr, beacon of Sigmaron. Surrounding its body was a mechanism of great art, a thing of sliding spheres pierced with fretwork. With the shifting of the immense clockwork Sigendil twinkled, and shone the brightest of all the stars in the heavens of the Celestial Realm.

The inhabitants of Azyr loved it well. Sailors charted safe courses across stormy seas by its light. Mothers hushed crying children and pointed, saying, ‘There is the holy light of our God-King, see how he watches over you as you sleep.’ Merchants swore oaths by it and laws were ratified by its light, so constant it was, for Sigendil never moved from its appointed place in the sky as other stars did. In an age of awful wonder, the matchless light of Sigendil was a source of certainty.

But though it was itself invariable, Sigendil had witnessed change, even in Azyr.

Far to the north towered Mount Celestian, Azyr’s greatest peak. Only once in history had the mountain been assailed, when Sigmar’s great hammer Ghal Maraz smashed its peak away, leaving a lofty plateau dominated by a lake of shining blue. Upon its shores he built a city whose scale and glory outshone even Azyrheim, for it was made to be the abode of gods, not mortals. The divine survivors of the World-That-Was gathered under Sigmar’s banner on Celestian, to rule the Eight Mortal Realms.

There was a castle of bones so huge one would think them carved fancily, though any who touched them would find them dry and osseous. Another

dwelling was a wooden stockade, much splintered and strewn about with more bones, these gnawed upon. To the east were twin, squat fortresses, one of iron and one of frozen fire. To the west was a trio of slender towers whose forms, though similar, reflected the differing temperaments of their builders. In a vale of scented woods where the waters of Lake Celestian tumbled to the lands below, grew an oak of inconceivable size.

At the centre of the city temples gathered upon a vast silver acropolis. From their midst a tower of blue light pierced Azyr's busy skies. Atop it was situated the Court of the Gods, a colonnaded space from whose vantage all the Mortal Realms could be seen. Thrones fit for titans ringed it – bone for Nagash, white marble for Tyrion, silver for Teclis, dark stone for Malerion, fire-hued amber for Grinnir and rustless steel for his brother, Grungni. Alarielle's was of pale heartwood rooted in the stone, while Sigmar's own gleamed golden. The thrones looked inward to the legendary Mirror of Bayla, a gleaming sheet of silver four yards across.

Together, mountain, city and court were known as the Highheim, the parliament of the gods in more peaceful ages.

No longer. The court had stood deserted for aeons.

The Ages of Myth had passed thousands of years ago. Mortals had forgotten the Highheim. Silence lay upon the city as thickly as the spent stardust that drifted in its thoroughfares.

That day, life returned a while. A lone figure trod the court. Noble of aspect and mightier than the greatest mortal, he was dwarfed by the buildings, and so his own stature was uncertain. He looked like the man he had been, ages gone in a different world. But god he was – Sigmar, the architect and lord of the city, and uniter of the gods.

Sigmar stood between the columns. Overhead the spectacular heavens of Azyr turned, to the south blazed matchless Sigendil, almost but not quite obscuring the husk of the World-That-Was behind it. Scented wind teased out Sigmar's long golden hair and stirred his cloak.

He waited impatiently. Though a god, he had a man's humours still. His patience had been exhausted by the long vigil of the Age of Chaos. Now his war was in motion, Sigmar had ceased to plan. He wanted to act.

Yet he must wait.

Night did its complex dance, the wheeling stars a backcloth to the motions of zodiacal beasts and divine mechanisms that sailed the lower heavens. Dawn arrived to find Sigmar deep in thought, head bent over the Mirror of Bayla. Would she come? He did not truly know. Their friendship had passed with the elder days.

The first rays of the sun struck the white pediment of the colonnade, washing marble orange. Sigmar's head rose. Sensing magic, he stood.

A glow took hold around the throne of Alarielle. The ancient wood creaked and groaned. It emitted a screeching crack, so that Sigmar thought it might explode, but it shuddered, and from its tall back fresh shoots sprouted, growing unnaturally fast, leaves budding from them as they unfurled and reached skyward. The throne's roots flexed, cracking the paving, the slow might of

trees quickened by divine power.

There was a wink of light, then another, and another still, until a cloud of golden motes danced around like fireflies. The swarm thickened and coalesced, becoming the form of a tall, proud woman. The scent of rising sap and luxuriant flowers wafted over the god king. The lights solidified, until the features of Alarielle could be clearly discerned. Light faded. The throne put out a crown of fragrant blossom, framing the goddess' broad wings of leaf and wood in white flowers.

Alarielle wore a crescent helm-crown, and carried a sinuous glaive. Her pale green skin was like that of a beautiful mortal's, save her right hand, which was of strong, clawed branches.

Sigmar broke into a smile. 'Alarielle, the lady of life. You came.'

Alarielle walked toward him, the motes of magic that made her image breaking apart a little as she moved. Her presence made the mirror shine. 'I can spare you this projection, Sigmar of the tribes of men, for a short while. Speak and tell me why you called me back to this place.'

'I thank you for coming. I appreciate the effort you have put forth.'

'You do right in thanking me.' Where she trod, delicate flowers sprang from the cracks in the paving. 'The days when you might summon me are no more, prince.' Her pupilless green eyes flashed in challenge.

Sigmar bowed. 'I would not dream of summoning you. I invited, you responded. It is so good to see you again.'

A small smile curved Alarielle's lips. 'So the mighty Sigmar has learned humility. I had thought to find you more arrogant than ever. Your armies march across all the Mortal Realms. To unleash war on the four lords of Chaos alone is not the act of a humble man. Your rashness almost ended me, you realise.'

'For that, my lady, you have my eternal apologies.'

She walked past him, trailing the smell of growth and new life, and looked out over the Highheim's deserted ways. 'No matter. Your actions, though impetuous, led to my rebirth and reinvigoration. You reawakened me. I spent too long brooding on defeat. If you had not caused my death, I would have been destroyed.' She swept her gaze across the empty city. 'So much beauty here, but it is sterile, bereft of life and purpose. It saddens me,' she said. She looked at him. 'I believed in your vision once, but it failed. If you have come to ask me to rejoin you here, to reform the pantheon of old, I will not.'

'I did not ask you here to reform our old order,' he said. 'Perhaps one day, but not now.'

'Perhaps then I will be interested, when a new season comes upon me,' she shrugged. 'Perhaps not.' She sighed, the air she exhaled dancing with colourful insects. 'If you ask for alliance, you already have it. My warriors fight alongside yours. Any reluctance the wargroves felt toward your warriors of lightning is fading. War is joined on all fronts.'

'I thank you for that also,' he said, 'and my Stormcast Eternals will aid the people of the forests wherever they may be found. But asking for alliance is also not my intent.'

'Then what do you want from me?' she asked, curious.

'Something more subtle than blades,' he said. 'Come with me.' He reached to take her hand. His fingers passed through the glowing lights making up her form, but she followed when he walked to the flat silver of the Mirror of Bayla.

'The gift of the Mage Bayla to the pantheon of old,' he said.

'I remember,' she said. 'Its use allows the viewer to see whither he will, be it in any realm.'

'That is so,' he said. He passed a hand over the metal. 'It is into the past that we shall look, into another time and place. We will witness the quest of Sanasay Bayla himself.'

'Are we to see the forging of this artefact?' she asked.

Sigmar smiled. 'We shall look back further than that, to the time he was a sage and a seeker in Andamar, at the far edges of Ghyran.'

'A seeker after what?' asked Alarielle. Her concern was rarely with thinking creatures of flesh. Her domain was of plants and growing things, and the wild spaces of the worlds. She knew little more of Bayla than she did of other short-lived fleshlings.

The mirror filled with swirling cloud. Lights flashed in the vapour, steadying until an image could be seen: a handsome man with walnut brown skin and a ready smile. Intelligence flashed in his eyes, and a hunger.

'He sought what all mortals seek,' Sigmar said. 'Knowledge.'

The image clarified, and the two gods looked back far in to the past, to a time before the coming of Chaos.

There came a day when the Mage Sanasay Bayla had learned all he could from the great minds of his era. After long study he was acclaimed as the finest thinker of his generation, and the most powerful wizard in all of Ghyran. His family rejoiced in his achievements, but for him it was not enough. Sanasay Bayla lacked purpose, and it troubled him.

He lay in bed, staring through the glassless windows at dancing green auroras over the south. In Andamar, Ghyran's life ran even into the sky.

Bayla exhaled loudly, waking his wife.

'What are you sighing about there, Sanasay?' she said sleepily.

'I do not mean to wake you,' he said.

'You did.' She smiled and rested her hand on his chest. 'What troubles you, my love?'

He was silent, and so his wife poked him.

'You lay hands on the greatest mage in Andamar, if not all of Ghyran?' he asked in mock outrage.

She laughed, a sound that meant the most to him in all the world. 'Tell me. If the greatest mage in Andamar, if not all of Ghyran, cannot confide in his wife, then he is a poor man, though a great wizard.'

Bayla frowned and laced his fingers behind his head. 'I have unlocked many of the mysteries of the world,' he said. 'I have mastered five of the eight schools of pure magic. I understand the rest well enough, and know sufficient of the darker arts to leave them alone. Every question I ask, I find the answer

to. I am bored, my wife. I must set myself a challenge that will test me. I need a purpose. I need to know why I do what I do, and to what end I should put my great knowledge.”

‘You could try getting up early every day, organising the household, seeing the children are cared for and that our finances do not collapse while you are riddling with fell beings,’ she said. ‘There is purpose there.’

He harrumphed.

‘I am teasing you, my love.’ She yawned.

‘I am without goal or cause. I must find out what it is I want,’ he said. ‘Then I shall be satisfied.’

‘What of the Realms’ End? You have never been there. It is said all knowledge can be learned where the realms cease to be.’

‘A myth,’ he said. ‘I determined long ago that it does not exist. The Realms are vast, perhaps infinite. I have travelled far, but never seen it. Every text I read suggests it is only a story.’

‘Then be content with what you have, my darling.’

‘Although I have much, the concern dogs me that there is more, if I but knew what to look for,’ he said worriedly. ‘I risk missing my greatest achievement.’

‘Surely the gods could help,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you ask them?’

She fell asleep. Sanasay Bayla could not. A new idea had come to him complete, and he set about planning its execution.

His wife probably meant for him to go to the temples, and consult with the priests there. But Sanasay was not like other men.

In Andamar’s Temple of Teclis the Wise, there was a tower of marble so slender only one person could climb the winding stair. As the stair neared the peak, it grew so narrow that the climber must proceed sideways. Finally, it opened via a thin hole onto a platform big enough for a single person to sit. On every side was a dizzying drop. The tiniest slip would condemn a man to a long fall and a swift death. Sanasay could have cast a spell upon himself, or used one of his marvellous devices, or conjured a great beast to fly to the top of the tower, but the gods dislike those that cheat.

He crept onto the pinnacle. Wind tugged at him as he unwrapped his mat and laid it on the moist stone, careful not to drop the sacred objects rolled within. When they were laid out in the proper manner, he sat cross-legged in the middle of the pinnacle. He poured a single drop of mona nectar into a silver cup, whispering the necessary incantations, and drank it back. The bitter liquid made his tongue burn, but the sensation quickly passed, and his mind buzzed as it moved to a different plane.

Sanasay Bayla slipped into a deep trance.

When he opened his eyes, he was walking upon clouds in a world with five suns. A nearer radiance turned the clouds to gold, forcing his eyes into slits. When he opened them, there was a tall figure not far ahead, made from purest light. His features were similar to man but he was not of his race. His garb was outlandish.

‘Great Teclis!’ called Bayla, and fell to his knees on the clouds.

‘Sanasay Bayla,’ said Teclis. ‘The quester after knowledge. You are brave to seek out the gods. I and my brother have watched you with much interest.’

‘Great Teclis,’ said Bayla, ‘who is the god of wisdom and arcane secrets. I beseech you, in all my—’

‘Hush now, Bayla,’ said Teclis in amusement. ‘I know why you look for me. You wish to know if Realms’ End is real, and how you might get there if it is.’

Bayla was not surprised the god could see into his thoughts. Teclis was the greatest wielder of magic in all the Realms.

‘You have this hunt for this place before, but gave up,’ said Teclis.

‘I convinced myself it did not exist. Foolishly, perhaps.’

‘I admire your dedication to your art, Sanasay Bayla,’ said the god. ‘I have known only a handful of your species able to learn so much of the ways of magic. But let it be known to you – too much knowledge is dangerous.’

‘You warn the forewarned,’ said Sanasay humbly.

‘I will tell you, for your motives are pure and your achievements many. Realms’ End exists.’

Bayla felt an uplifting in his heart. ‘How can I go there?’

‘There is a gate in the circling mountains that bound your land, those that no man has crossed. The gate leads into a tunnel that takes a route not of this plane. On the far side, Realms’ End is to be found.’

‘I will set out immediately!’ said Bayla.

‘There are two things you must know. The gate is locked, and there is no key. Only he who can forge the unforgeable can furnish you with one. On the far side is a monster which only death can kill. Find a way to overcome these obstacles, and Realms’ End will be open to you.’

‘I thank you, my lord,’ said Bayla gratefully.

‘Sanasay,’ said Teclis. ‘Be warned. This quest will consume you. You will discover your heart’s desire, but you may not like what you find. Perhaps it would be best for you to remain at home.’

‘I cannot know what it is until I see it,’ said Bayla sadly. ‘Though the risk is great, I must witness it for myself.’

‘Then go with my blessing,’ said Teclis. There was a clap of thunder. Bayla fell through the clouds. He landed hard in his meditating body. It rocked dangerously as he awoke, but he did not fall.

So it was he set out on his next task.

His wife pleaded with him not to go. The Iron Temples of the duardin were many years of travel away, and there was no guarantee its guardians would allow him within the precincts.

‘I must!’ he said. His young children clustered around their mother, and clutched at her skirts, but he was blinded by anguish, and could not see their tears. ‘What if I turn away, and never realised my full potential?’

For six years he travelled, through many realmgates and over hundreds of lands. Finally, older, scarred and weary, he came to the Iron Temples in Chamon’s Ferron Vale.

‘You cannot enter,’ said the temple guard, when Bayla had stated his case.

'This is sacred ground, dedicated to Grungni. No manling may go within.' So the conversation began, and so it continued, developing into bargaining, then arguing, but the duardin remained unmoved, and they would not let him inside.

Bayla went high into the mountains, where he could overlook the carved peaks and smoking forges of the Iron Temples. Powerful runes glowed in the rock and metal of its walls. For all his sorcerous ability, the wards of the temple were forever denied.

Miserable, Bayla descended the mountains into forests of iron-thorned trees. By a wall of rock aglitter with veins of ore, he made his camp and settled down for a night of brooding, staring into the flames of his campfire.

'Won't let you in, lad?' said a gruff voice.

Bayla started. Without his noticing, a duardin had taken a seat on the far side of the fire. His face was hooded, but from the shadows protruded a white beard of impressive length, and he smoked a pipe of bone so ancient it was polished smooth and stained dark with use. Bayla knew enough of Grungni's folk to recognise an elder when he saw one.

The stranger chuckled at Bayla's reaction. 'Sorry, lad, I have a habit of creeping up on people. My apologies. Do you mind if you share your fire?'

'Of course you may,' said Bayla, who was wise to the ways of strange encounters. 'Please, sit. I have a small measure of ale and food that I would gladly share.'

'Well!' the duardin said in appreciation. 'Hospitality like that in the wilds, eh? Very good, very, very good.'

Bayla handed over his ale skin, which the duardin drained to the last drop, and gave over his food, which the duardin shared generously. They ate in companionable silence. When they were done, the duardin sniffed deeply. 'Not bad. Tasty. I long for a crumb of chuf, but they don't make that in this time and place.' He fell silent a space and twiddled with his pipe, lost in his memories. 'So then,' he said brightly. 'What's a manling like you want with the smith god of my people?'

'I seek a key to the door in the mountains that will lead me to Realms' End,' Bayla said. He blinked in surprise. He had not intended to reveal his purpose, but there were the words, tripping off his tongue!

'Ahhh, well, Grungni can be a prickly sort. I have known him for, well,' the duardin laughed again, a sound like rough stones being rasped together, 'a very long time. Tell you what, why don't you borrow mine?'

The duardin reached into his dirty jerkin and pulled out a slender key with five pointed teeth, three on top, two on the bottom, upon a leather thong. His massive fingers should never have been so deft, but he undid the tiny knot in the necklace easily and tossed the key across the fire. Bayla caught it in surprise.

'There you are, lad.'

'Is it real?' Bayla asked in amazement. 'I was told there was no key in all existence!'

'An aelf tell you that, did he?' said the dwarf sourly. 'Don't trust them. Besides,' he added slyly, 'he never said anything about outside existence, did

he?’

‘Thank you,’ Bayla said.

‘A fair bargain for your kindness, and that ale.’ The dwarf stood up and brushed off his knees. ‘Right then, got to be going. Things to do, people to sneak up on unawares.’ He laughed at his own jest.

‘Who are you?’ asked Bayla.

Deep in the stranger’s hood, eyes twinkled. ‘Just a traveller, lad, much like yourself.’ With that, he went into the night, and disappeared.

Bayla could not know if the key was genuine or not, but he had no choice. By the same tortuous route, the mage returned to Ghyran. The road to the mountains took him far from his home, but he was eager to complete his quest.

For a further three years he searched for the gate. Only by questioning the local inhabitants carefully did he glean an inkling as to its whereabouts, and even then he wasted many months in fruitless search. Strange lights shone on the far side of the mountains that no mortal had ever crossed, tantalising him unbearably.

Eventually, by chance it seemed, he came across a door barely big enough to admit him, set high in a cliff face. With trembling hands, Bayla slid the key home. It fit perfectly and turned smoothly, as if recently oiled. The door swung inward, and Bayla squeezed inside. At first he had to wriggle his way down a tiny tunnel, but it soon opened up into a wide, well-made passageway, with walls of fine masonry. By his magic he lit his way. Soon after his entrance, Bayla’s ears were troubled by a thundering rumble, and a hot wind that went in and out – the breath of the monster that guarded the way. Several days of travel later, during which Bayla lived off bitter mosses and water dribbling down the walls, the tunnel opened up into a giant cave. At the centre was chained a wolf of impossible size. Its head was as large as a cathedral, and rested on paws big as houses. Four thick chains ran from its collar, securing it to anchors set in the wall. All through Bayla’s walk the noise of its breathing had become louder. In the cave it howled like a hurricane. It looked asleep, but as he approached, eyes big as pools opened and stared redly at him.

‘You cannot pass,’ it said. ‘None can, whether god or mortal. It is the law, of which I am prisoner and guardian both.’

‘Then I shall kill you,’ said Bayla.

The wolf gave out a howling laugh that buffeted the mage back and forth.

‘You can try.’

Bayla had come prepared with every spell of death he could muster. Raising his arms, he flung back his head, and called down the most potent slaughter-curse in the realms.

The magic released was primordial and deadly. It screamed as Bayla drew it from the rock of the mountain and fashioned it into a spear of crackling power. With a roaring incantation, he cast the energy at the wolf.

The magic hurtled at the beast, piercing it between the eyes. The wolf cocked its eyebrow, unharmed. ‘You will have to do better than that,’ it said.

Sanasay Bayla tried. Nothing worked. The wolf was impervious to the direst

magics known. Frustrated, Bayla even attempted to stab it in its massive paw with his dagger. The metal shattered. The wolf grumbled with mirth.

'I have not had such entertainment in many ages,' it said.

Bayla glared at it. 'Let me pass,' he said.

'I shall not,' said the wolf.

'Then you leave me no choice.' Bayla pulled out a crystal phial, full of a dark liquid. Defiantly looking the wolf in the eye, Bayla threw down the stopper and drained the bottle. 'Poison,' Bayla said. 'Now we shall see who has the last laugh.'

He fell down, dead.

The world changed. Bayla's soul rose from his body. From rocks that now glowed with inner light rose screaming ghosts, luminous scythes in their hands. They rushed at him, fleshless jaws wide, swinging their weapons for the thread that joined Bayla's body to his soul.

Bayla had no intention to die completely. As the cavern receded from him at tremendous speed, he fought against the gatherers of souls with his magic, keeping them from severing his connection to the Mortal Realms. Through planes inhabited by the strangest things they sped, thundering down through veils of layered realities toward the Realm of Shyish, where the abode of mortals abut those places beyond even the gods' ken.

Bayla burst through a cavern roof, the gatherers swooping around him. Shyish revealed its dreary landscapes. He flew over shadowy villages and moonlit meres, vast bone deserts and forests of trees that shivered with the sorrow of imprisoned souls. Parts of this land were roofed in stone, and from holes gnawed through it tumbled an endless rain of corpses, the dead of many realms come to take their final rest.

Ahead there was a mighty necropolis, a city of pyramids and bone towers whose edges crackled with a nimbus of soul light. The gatherers redoubled their attacks, their wails draining the warmth from Bayla's being, their scythes only ever a moment from reaping his soul.

The battle continued right to the gates in the city's wall of bone. Bayla halted. A man stood there, cadaverous, but alive. With a flick of his wrist he dismissed the gatherers of souls, leaving the disembodied essence of Bayla alone.

'You are dead, and yet your thread is not cut,' said the necromancer. 'Why do you resist the inevitable?'

'I am Sanasay Bayla, of Ghyran. I die because I wish to speak with the Lord of Death.'

The necromancer smiled, exposing black teeth. 'Be careful what you wish for, Sanasay Bayla. My lord has been expecting you.'

Bayla was led through streets of bone and dark granite where the dead were legion. The recently dead were engaged in the never-ending task of expanding Nagash's city, heaping bone and fashioned stone into new buildings. Skeletal warriors tramped the streets in rattling cohorts. Vampire lords rushed by in dark carriages. But though the city was huge, and populous, there was not a voice to be heard. The dead executed their duties in silence but for the hideous

clattering of bones that echoed from every street.

They went to a black pyramid whose sides gleamed like mirrors, and whose capstone was of pure wyrdstone. Deep inside, past numberless deathrattle regiments, Bayla was brought into a lofty hall. There sat Nagash, Lord of Death, surrounded by the ageless pomp of his court. Ghostly handmaidens circled him, singing mournful songs.

‘Who dares to tread the road of death to Shyish, and yet is not dead?’ said Nagash.

Bayla’s soul stepped forward boldly, the thread of his mortal life held lightly in one hand. ‘It is I, great one, Sanasay Bayla of Andamar in Ghyran. I have come to seek an audience.’

Nagash’s bony jaws clacked mirthlessly. ‘To beg a favour, I think. What do you seek?’

‘I have sought many years to find passage to Realms’ End,’ he said. ‘I have come close to fulfilling my quest, but my way is barred.’

‘Afrener, the wolf at the door,’ said Nagash. ‘He keeps guard.’

‘I was told only death can kill him. You are death. Strike him down for me, so that I might look into the spaces beyond reality, and discover my true purpose in this life.’

Nagash stared at him with empty eye sockets. ‘Sanasay Bayla, I know you as I know all mortals. All creatures pass through my domain sooner or later, and echoes of them are here forever. I never grant mortals favours, but for you I will make an exception, if only because you are a mage of awesome power. Agree to serve me for five hundred years and five days after your death, and I shall grant your desire, and slay this beast.’

‘And what after five centuries?’

‘You shall pass from Shyish, which for all its affinity with the beyond is but a Mortal Realm, into the Unknown Countries past my borders, as all souls ultimately must.’

Bayla knew better than to make foolish promises to a god, but he was desperate. ‘Agreed!’ he said.

‘Then go, and do not forget our bargain,’ said Nagash. He tilted his head to one side. Witchfire flickered in his eyes. ‘It is done. But be swift, such a beast cannot remain dead for long. Awake!’

Sanasay Bayla returned to life with a moaning breath. He rolled onto his side, his restarted heart banging painfully behind his ribs, and vomited out all trace of the poison in his body. When he was done, he rose shakily, and looked upon the still corpse of Afrener. Mindful of Nagash’s words, he hurried past. Shortly past the beast’s reeking hindquarters, he came to the land of Realms’ End.

What can be said of a place that defies mortal comprehension? Few have seen the Realms’ End, and all who have witnessed it differently. Bayla saw the far side of the mountains, sweeping down from unscaleable peaks to a short plain of bare rock. The horizon was close, the space beyond boiling with crimson and gold lights. There was no sky.

Full of relief that he would soon know his purpose, Bayla began a staggering run toward the edge of the worlds.

It was not far. He stopped where the land did, and peered down into a maelstrom of noise and fury. Amid roaring networks of lightning, lands were being born, coming into being fully formed, with forests, rivers and cities upon them, and no doubt peoples and histories too. They began as small floating islands, but grew quickly as more land solidified from the energy around them. Enlarged, the worldlets sank under their own weight, spinning slowly back toward the edge of Ghyran. At some preordained depth, they vanished in a burst of light, and so the process continued. Three lands were born while Bayla watched.

But of his purpose, he could see no sign. Searching up and down the uncanny shore, he spied a robed figure clutching a staff in three hands. Bayla did not recognise its sort, and was suspicious of it, but having no option he made his way toward it.

'Sanasay Bayla,' the creature said raspingly as the mage halted a staff's length away. 'You have come to discover your purpose in life.' Its robes were a crystal blue, and a stylised eye topped its staff.

'I have,' said the mage.

'Here the worlds of Ghyran are born from nothing. This is a place is of purest magic. Everything can be seen. Behold!' said the creature. It opened out its arms, and pointed to the roiling energies beyond the final shore.

A vision of Bayla as a wise lord appeared, surrounded by adoring subjects.

'To be a king?' he asked the being. 'Is that my purpose?'

'More. Watch!' commanded the creature.

A procession of images paraded through the sky. Bayla saw himself in his library, moving faster than the eye could follow as time accelerated and the years coursed through the land of Andamar. New buildings sprouted, fashions changed. Wondrous devices were installed around the city, but Bayla did not age. His library grew in size and content. Knowledge unbounded filled his mind, he felt an echo of what he might learn, and was amazed. The great and the wise of many nations and peoples consulted with him. His name was known across time and in every realm. He watched avidly, eyes wide, and yet, and yet... There was something missing.

'Where is my wife?' he asked. 'My family?'

'They are not what you desire,' said the creature. 'Else why would you be here?'

The thing's words rang falsely, and Bayla set his powerful mind to work on the stuff of creation where the vision played. He found it easy to manipulate. The creature shrieked out a spell, but its staff flew from its hand at a thought from Bayla and he refocused the scrying. The mage saw his wife and children grow old, unloved and neglected. As he succeeded, they failed, and were shunned. Palaces were constructed in his honour, while their graves were choked by vines and crumbled into the dirt. Realisation hit him. He wrenched the focus of the vision to the present, back to his home.

His wife waited for him. They had a new house, it seemed, and she bore all

the trappings of success. Yet she looked sadly out over the minarets of Andamar. He was shocked at the signs of age that had settled on her, though she remained beautiful. His eldest son came to her side, to discuss some matter of business, and he saw he had been forced to become a man without his father to guide or nurture him.

Bayla stepped back in shock. 'I have been away too long!' he said. 'What am I doing?'

The creature was hunched over, two of its long-fingered blue hands clutching at the scorched third. 'Eternal life, ultimate power. These things are within your grasp,' it croaked. 'That is what you desire! Pledge yourself to my master, and they will be yours.'

The vision wavered, back to the hollow glories of an endless future. Bayla's face softened a moment at the opportunity offered, but hardened again.

'No. That is what I think I should want, but it is not.' He concentrated, and the image shifted back to the domestic scene. 'That is what I wanted, all along. To be a father and a husband. That is the purpose of a man in life. Power is fleeting. Family is eternal.' And it was. He saw son after daughter after son being born to the line of his people. Among them were many who were mighty and wise, and Andamar prospered under their guidance. It seemed it would remain forever so, until suddenly fire rent the sky, and the city fell into ruin as a great cataclysm passed over all the realms.

'Too much!' screeched the creature. The vision fled like ripples over water. Bayla looked at the thing sharply.

'What was that?' he said, rounding on it. Arcane power glowed around his hands. 'I do not know what you are, but I know of your kind. You are told of in the oldest books, the things of the formless realms. The daemons of Chaos.'

The creature laughed, and raised its hands in conjuration. But Bayla was a mage beyond even the servants of Tzeentch, and he blasted it from existence. Its soul fled shrieking into the maelstrom, and passed beyond the fertile voids of Ghyran's edge, whence it would not return for thousands of years.

Bayla was troubled. War would come, one day.

Perhaps he had found two purposes.

He would warn the gods.

Turning away from the formless spaces, Bayla began the long journey home.

The mirror cleared of mist. Sigmar and Alarielle stared at their own faces caught in the silver.

'That was why he made us the mirror,' said Sigmar. 'Little attention we paid to his warnings.' The God-King shook his head in regret. 'Bayla was rare among men. He learned wisdom. With his gifts he could have risen and joined the ranks of the gods, but at the last he turned back. He understood that immortality is not to be craved, that the end of life gives the little span it has great meaning.'

'The gift of all mortals,' Alarielle said. 'They are free of the burden of life eternal. There is no surprise in this, and no new wisdom.'

'Every time they learn it, it is new,' Sigmar insisted. 'So few of them realise

it from the beginning. Their lives are so short, their fear of death prevents them from recognising the gift they have.'

'You are immortal,' said Alarielle. 'They will find your sympathy false.'

'I did not seek to be so,' said Sigmar. 'I would have happily lived and died a mortal king. Some higher power had other plans for me.' He looked at her earnestly. 'Many chose Chaos because they had no other choice. They can be redeemed, even those whose hearts may seem black. But there are always those that seek to cheat death, and the lords of Chaos offer a way to do so, and are cunning enough to allow a few to ascend to become their immortal slaves. That is how they gained access to the realms in the first place. We became too distant from our charges, and they grew afraid. Chaos offered them immortality, of a sort. They did not know it was a trap.'

'Then what do you want of me?' said Alarielle.

'You have held yourself aloof for many ages, my lady,' he said. 'It would aid us all in defeating the four powers for good if you went again among the mortals. Teach them your wisdom. You of all the gods understand the ebb and flow of mortality best, and that death is but a turning of the way.'

'I do not know what becomes of the souls of men,' she said. 'Does even Nagash? You ask me to lie to them.'

'Not at all,' he said. 'I wish you to invest in them a love of all that is natural and alive, to appreciate its power and fecundity. If they learn to follow the rhythm of life's wondrous patterns, fewer of them will be tempted to fear its end. There always will be those who are incapable of fellow feeling, or whose greed outmatches their empathy,' he said. 'Many others can be saved by you.'

'I cannot do this,' she said. 'What is the point? Chaos rules already.'

'Cannot, or will not?' said Sigmar. 'You were worshipped all throughout Ghyran and beyond once, my lady. You can be again. You have become warlike to respond to a time of war, but you must reach inside yourself, and find that gentler creature you once were. We need to look beyond the end of this war, and prepare for peace. If we do not, then there will be another golden age, but soon enough Chaos will return and shatter the realms anew.'

'Victory and defeat has a cycle of its own,' she said. 'It is the way of things.'

'Maybe war and Chaos are the only constants of reality,' he said. 'But I do not have to accept it, and I will fight it for all time if I must. I cannot believe this is how the realms were meant to be. Send forth your spirits to speak with the wisest women and canniest men. Chaos has long used such missionaries against us. We shall do the same, and we have the advantage, for Chaos lies.'

Alarielle sighed, and the sound was of the wind in the boughs of a sleeping forest. She stared off across the plains of Azyr, still cloaked in the dark. The sun rose high enough to strike through the columns, casting long shadows across the city of the Hightheim. When it struck Alarielle, she closed her eyes and basked in the warmth of it. Her body became translucent, and began to fade.

'I will do what I can, Sigmar Heldenhammer,' she said, her form becoming indistinct. 'But if I have learned one thing in my long existence, it is that humans rarely listen, and their males more rarely still.'

The motes of light diffused. Her outline hung in the air a second. They flared and vanished, leaving a cloud of petals to drift to the floor.

Sigmar watched the day enter the city of the gods. As the golden light of Azyr's sun flooded the empty streets, he remembered a better time. He did not know if there were higher gods set over him to guide him as he shepherded his mortal kin, but he gave a silent prayer to them that finer times would return.

Then he too vanished, leaving the Highheim to the silence and the light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*.

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An extract from *Hammerhal & Other Stories*.



The divine consciousness of Sigmar Heldenhammer, the God-King, raced down from the celestial peaks of Azyr and into the tangled canopies of Ghyran, the Realm of Life. His awareness, shrouded in storm winds and rain, descended through vast clouds of floating spores, passing by the shattered husks of sky-islands and storm-reefs to the green lands below.

Ghyran was a vibrant realm. Life was everywhere, taking innumerable shapes. It grew and spread with a hunger that defied all logic, responding to the eternal song of Alarielle the Everqueen. He could hear her voice echoing from every corner of her realm, as the Goddess of Life tried to put right all that was wrong and heal the wounds of war. But there were places that even her song could not reach. Places where other, darker gods held sway.

In moments, the Nevergreen Mountains rose wild about him. Sigmar was there and yet not there, a shard of his godly might riding a storm wind through the dark pine reaches of the Hexwood, which covered the mountains' slopes.

Gradually the wind coalesced, joining with the light of the stars and the sound of distant thunder to assume the seeming of a man, clad in golden war-plate embossed with celestial heraldry. It was a form the God-King had taken often, in days gone by, when the Mortal Realms were at peace and the gods were of one mind, united in a pantheon.

But all things ended. One by one, the gods had abandoned Sigmar's grand alliance, or betrayed him. The embers of an old, familiar anger flared at the thought, and thunder rumbled somewhere over the mountain peaks. Even Alarielle had retreated at last, withdrawing deep into the hidden glades of Ghyran, there to sleep and dream.

And as the old alliances shattered, war had rocked the Mortal Realms to their very roots. The Ruinous Powers – the four Dark Gods of Chaos – pressed close about the threshold of reality, and no realm save his own had been safe from their attentions.

Ghyran had seen more than its share of that conflict. The Plague God, Nurgle, had claimed it as his own, turning the rampant creation to stagnation. But the servants of the Everqueen had fought alongside Sigmar's own, if grudgingly, and had beaten the foetid servants of Nurgle back on several fronts, weakening the Plague God's hold on the realm.

Nevertheless, where one of the Dark Gods weakened, the others grew strong. That was the nature of the Ruinous Powers. They waged war on each other as readily as on Sigmar or the other gods of the Mortal Realms. And where Nurgle found himself stymied, his great rival Tzeentch, the God of Change, was sure to seek some advantage.

And here, in the Nevergreen Mountains, the Architect of Fate was making his move. Sigmar could sense the innumerable skeins of possibility and chance weaving through the Hexwood. Every tree in the forest thrummed with corruption. Each one seemed to be a black wound in reality, and past them he could see cancerous pathways stretching away somewhere, beyond even his sight.

Something vast and monstrous waited here, just beyond the trees, watching him. It had foreseen his arrival, and its laughter itched at the back of his mind like a nagging ache. A susurrus of muttering pursued him as he moved on, teasing and taunting him. He longed to face the laughing presence that he knew to be Tzeentch as he might once have. In those early days, he had matched his might against that of the Ruinous Powers, but he'd come to learn through harsh experience that there was no profit in such a confrontation. So instead, he ignored it and continued on, speeding through the forest, faster now, seeking what had drawn his attention, even in high Sigmaron in his home realm of Azyr.

He felt the touch of a mind, much like his own, start in recognition as his consciousness entered a wide clearing. Twisted trees rose up like the crumbled parapets of a broken citadel, casting strange shadows across the bestial shapes cavorting beneath their branches. The beastkin reeked of Tzeentch; his corrupting touch was obvious upon them. The tzaangors were avian-featured and horned, bedecked in savage totems and bearing weapons of bone, iron and crystal. Some of them had once been men, before the magics of Tzeentch had twisted them into new, more awful shapes. Others had been born mere beasts, raised up by foul rites to walk on two legs rather than four.

Whatever their origin, the beastkin capered to the dissonant music of crouched drummers and whirling pipers, screeching and howling in time to the cacophony. The trees about the clearing seemed to flex and bend with the raucous noise, their bark blistering beneath the caress of the damnable incense rising from the multi-coloured bonfires which littered the clearing.

At its heart, a blister of crystalline rock sprouted from the soil. It was a flux-cairn – a sour growth of stagnant magics, raised by the servants of Tzeentch to honour their dark master and facilitate his endless schemes. It spread like a gangrenous crown, its milky facets catching the light in eerie ways. The formation of fossilised sorcery towered over the tzaangors and reverberated with the thumping of their drums. Motes of iridescence, which Sigmar knew to be captured magics, crawled through it like fireflies.

The flux-cairn was the foul heart of the forest, the darkling pathways hidden within the trees all stretching unseen through its facets and into unknown realms beyond. Sigmar could feel the twisted paths growing, stretching towards their destination. The sensation of it was like the hum of a mosquito in

his skull, or an itch he could not scratch. He desired nothing more than to destroy the cairn, to call down the lightning which was his to command and shatter it into a million pieces.

But something stayed his hand. He gazed deeper into the heart of the flux-cairn, and that was when he saw them: silvery spheres, wrapped in something that might have been vines or algae, hanging suspended within the cairn.

‘Soulpods,’ he murmured.

The newborn seedlings of Alarielle’s favoured servants: the sylvaneth.

The soulpods throbbed with potential – they were the raw stuff of life, waiting for their moment to bloom and grow. Within them, tree-kin spirits – though of what sort Sigmar could not say – waited for their rebirth and clamoured for release. They flickered within their cage of crystal. They sensed him, and their unformed consciousness stretched out towards him, imploring him for aid.

Aid he could not give them. This place was not his, and already he could feel the Everqueen’s anger at his presence growing. She had sensed him the moment he had entered Ghyran unannounced, and had raced with the winds to confront him. He felt her anger at his intrusion wash over him like the heat of a summer’s day. In an attempt to forestall her fury, he asked, ‘How long have they been captives, sister?’

‘Too long, Thunderer.’ Alarielle’s voice scraped across his consciousness like the sting of a hundred nettles. Her seeming appeared before him in a swirl of loose leaves and pollen. Teeth made from thorns were bared in a snarl of challenge. ‘It is no concern of yours, Lord of the Heavens. Leave this place and seek your own battles.’

Though it was his servants who had helped weaken the Dark Gods’ hold on Ghyran, Sigmar knew that Alarielle bore him little love. Perhaps she still blamed him for failures of old, or perhaps the war-song now beat so strongly within her that she could not perceive help when it was freely offered. Either way, he was reluctant to test the fragile bonds of their current alliance. And yet he could not bring himself to depart.

‘What is happening here, sister? Perhaps I can be of help...’

She swelled with wrath at his words, her form expanding to gigantic proportions, invisible to the mortal eye but unsettling nonetheless. Like Sigmar, her physical manifestation was elsewhere, engaged in some other conflict. But this shard of her was potent enough.

‘I need no aid. This is my place. My realm. Not yours.’

He could feel a familiar rage boiling within her. Long years of hardship had worn her patience to less than nothing. She longed to strike at the enemy as he himself did – to drive them before her and cast their corpses into the deepest pits. Her anger was like a hurricane beating against his perception. He drew back, lest it draw him in.

Around them, tzaangors sniffed the air and squawked nervously. They could not discern either god, but some magical sense, gifted to them by their twisted patron, had alerted them that something was amiss. The air was alive with magics.

Sigmar turned. The bowers and glens of the forest echoed with screams. He heard blades sink noisily into wood. Flesh was being torn by splintery claws, and bone snapped within constricting coils of vine. Something was coming.

'I merely came to offer my aid,' he began again, but Alarielle flung out a claw of pine needles and blossoms, silencing him.

'My children have arrived. They come, and this farce ends.'

With an ear-splitting shriek, the sylvaneth erupted into the clearing. The tree-kin were bark-covered nightmares, with splintery jaws and branch-like talons. They resembled humans, but only at a distance. Some towered over their companions, swinging blades made from fossilised wood and rock. Others bore no weapons save their claws. They fell upon the tzaangors like the rage of the Everqueen made manifest. The beastkin screeched and fought back, trying to protect the flux-cairn.

The battle was fierce. Sigmar watched as a titanic sylvaneth swung a tzaangor about by its horn, smashing it to a bloody paste against the ground. The gleaming falchions and spears of the tzaangors drew sap from the twisting bodies of the tree-kin. The battle swung one way, and then the other. For every tzaangor that fell, two more raced to take its place, yet the sylvaneth fought with a fury that the beastkin could not match. The soulpods were their future, and they would risk almost anything to save them.

The air pulsed with Alarielle's war-song as the Everqueen urged her children on. The wordless harmony rose and fell with the wind whipping between the trees, driving the sylvaneth to greater effort. Then, all at once, a shriek echoed through the glen.

Sigmar saw a hideous figure clamber atop the flux-cairn, staff in hand. This tzaangor wore ragged robes, and its thin form was bedecked with totems and sorcerous fetishes. It was a shaman, a wielder of twisted magics. It slammed the ferrule of its staff down against the top of the cairn, and the crystalline facets flashed with silent, sickly lightning.

The soulpods screamed. Their cry, part fear and part pain, echoed through the minds of every living thing in the clearing. Whatever the shaman was doing, it was hurting the nascent spirits. Alarielle echoed their cry, and her anger shook the clearing to its roots. The trees wept leaves, and the ground ruptured. The flux-cairn itself shook, and more lightning flashed as the soulpods within continued to wail.

The tzaangor shaman screeched meaningfully.

The threat was plain, obvious even to the most bloodthirsty soul. The sylvaneth were prepared to risk themselves, but not the very thing they'd come to save. The tree-kin retreated, slowly at first, and then more quickly. They slipped away, vanishing into the gloom, as the tzaangor screeched and howled in celebration of their victory.

Alarielle watched in silence, her earlier rage gone as quickly as it had come. Her seeming shrank into itself, her gaze fixed upon the flux-cairn and its prisoners. They called to her, but she could not answer them. She turned to look at Sigmar, her expression unreadable. She would not ask for aid. Could not. He understood – it was not the way of a god to beg aid from another.

‘Sister, let me help you,’ he said. He held out his hand. ‘As I have done before, let me do so now. Together, we might...’

But her seeming was gone. Like a morning mist, it wavered and dispersed, taking her attentions with it. There were other battles to be fought elsewhere that demanded her attentions. Ghyran shook with the drumbeat of war. This battle was lost; others might yet be won.

Sigmar let his hand drop. Weariness stole over him. Once, Alarielle would not have hesitated to accept his aid. Once, he and the other gods would have come to her aid unasked.

But those days were long past. The pantheon was dust, and less than dust.

He looked up, seeking relief in the stars. Azyr. The Celestial Realm. *His* realm. The last true bulwark against the depredations of the Ruinous Powers. He had his own wars to fight, his own realm to defend. If the other gods did not desire his help, he would leave them to it, for good or ill. But as he made ready to depart, he heard again the laughter of Tzeentch ringing out of the hidden places, taunting him.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the laughter fell momentarily silent. The celestial lightning coiled about Sigmar as the old anger flared fully now. It was never far from the surface. He was a tempest wrought in the shape of a man. His hair and beard were as swirling black clouds, and his eyes were full of lightning. His face became a swirl of stars, blazing with cold light. His voice boomed like thunder as he bellowed a challenge into the teeth of the laughter. He was the first storm and the last, the storm which would wash the filth of Chaos from the Mortal Realms forever.

He lowered his hands, and the lightning calmed its writhing. The stars retreated, and the tempest with them, leaving only the cold edge of determination behind. The stars shone bright overhead, and he knew what he must do.

As he had done before, he would do now. And the Dark Gods be damned.

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