

WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR



THE
GARDEN
OF MORTAL DELIGHTS

ROBERT RATH

WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR



THE
GARDEN
OF MORTAL DELIGHTS
ROBERT RATH

BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit
blacklibrary.com



MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS

CONTENTS

Cover

The Garden of Mortal Delights – Robert Rath

About the Author

An Extract from ‘Sylvaneth’

A Black Library Publication

eBook license

THE GARDEN OF MORTAL DELIGHTS

Robert Rath

*Arise, all ye spirits, arise in the soul glade,
O children of the Everqueen, what dost thou see?
A foe-host has come bearing ember and axe-blade,
To poison the water and butcher the tree.*

*Armour of ore they have pillaged from mountains,
And pelts of thick fur torn from unwilling beasts.
They come hence with daemons, both fair and befouled,
And ecstatic moans on the lips of their priests.*

*Grant them bitter welcome with stone-sword and claw-root,
With borrowed earth-arms do we strike the first blow.
And soon we shall lay these gifts back in the soil,
All slick with the nourishing blood of the foe.*

*Hold fast, forest children, the Mirrored One cometh!
He cuts down our kinfolk, blades thick with sap-gore.
I weep at the sound of your pain-song and fear-dirge,
And reap lamentiri to sow you once more.*

Hold fast, he comes!

He comes! Hold fast!
Do not break the song.

Wilde Kurdwen removed her claw from the dryad's root, unable to bear the dream-song. A season's cycle later, her last battle-chant still echoed in the souls of those she had failed.

They still sung, still striving to answer the war cry of their branchwych.

Indeed, the dryads twitched as they dreamed. Finger-branches clenched and released. Gnarled roots, planted deep in rich earth, twisted like running ankles. The flowers that bloomed from their chests, arms and legs shivered. From afar, it looked as though a flock of purple butterflies had alighted on their bodies, their petal wings opening and closing like eyelashes.

But there were no butterflies here. Nothing so delicate could live on this island.

Crouched, she could even imagine these sisters back in a Neos glade, their disquiet merely the natural, traumatic cycle of growth and regrowth. And indeed, many ripe fruits hung from these elegant spirits. Berries clustered around their throats like jewels on the neck of a high-born bride. Dark spices burst up through the cracked bark of their roots. And the feathery pollen stems inside the purple flowers would, after being pounded, dry into the finest sapphrin. They were blossoming, verdant.

Yet these dryads dreamed of battle. Of trespassers. Of blades stained amber by torchlight, of men with nets and kin cut down.

And they dreamed of axe blades chopping deep into their own flesh.

For these twitching, still-living dryads had no heads. Each one was decapitated, planted, a vehicle only for growth. New shoots emerged from the stumps of their necks – for dryads are resilient spirits – but soon the menial gardeners would come to trim them back.

They were not allowed to grow, for dryads themselves did not produce the fruit, spices or fine edible flowers. These delicacies came from the plants grafted on to their bodies – their shoots inserted into the living bark and wood-flesh with sharp knives and sealing wax – parasites that sapped from the dryads' life force to make their branches heavy with culinary delights.

And no matter how much Wilde Kurdwen tried to fool herself in the quiet hours of night, there was no forest glade beyond this copse of headless spirits, only an obsidian wall that blocked the spirit-song.

High above, the branchwych saw the torches of warriors patrolling the battlements.

It was not a prison – it was a pleasure garden.

Red juice ran from the corner of his mouth, past his sharp chin and down a throat elegant as a swan's. A concubine dabbed at it with a war banner he'd pried from the hands of a dead witch aelf.

It was a petty pleasure, wiping his mouth with their sacred colours. But Revish the Epicurean lived for pleasure, petty or not, and he was old enough to know that the smallest experiences often brought the greatest joy.

He raised another tangberry and bit, rolling it in his mouth, tasting it with a tongue that split like a snake's. Days ago, he'd felt the stub of a third tip sprouting below the others, and had sacrificed six prisoners to thank Slaanesh for his newly expanded palate.

He had been force-feeding one prisoner spiced crème for weeks, and it was his liver that had preceded this delectable tart.

Revish staffed the fortress kitchen with chefs – human trophies of his conquests – and it was always good to have more than one on hand. After all, they tended to go mad fulfilling his culinary desires.

For Revish the Epicurean coveted taste above all else. In past centuries he had other fascinations, it was true. The pounding blood-song of his body as he pursued the enemy. Carnal delights of flesh. Exotic intoxicants. Yet for centuries, he'd found no battle glee as savoury as the first bite of a buttered eel, no pleasure of the flesh greater than a gryph-hound grilled with expert precision. Nothing so intoxicating as wine from a good vin-grape, made plump by rich soil and warm sun.

So he'd put aside the shallow, adolescent pleasures of violence, sensuality and athleticism. The tongue was his altar now, and upon it he sacrificed all manner of animals, plants, sweets and men.

And it was well known that the master was not to be disturbed at his meal – which was why his warrior-consort Sybbolith waited patiently, her boot on the neck of the prostrate man.

'Speak,' said Revish, as the concubine dabbed his face with rose water.

'A menial from the pleasure gardens,' Sybbolith said. Her eyes, golden and whiteless like those of a jungle cat, stared at her lord. Her thumb slid tenderly over the hellstrider whip coiled at her belt. 'He broke the rule.'

The menial quaked, bones showing through his translucent skin. Hands filthy with dirt. It was impossible to tell whether he was twenty or sixty – like the cooks, the garden menials did not last long.

‘Is this true, filth?’ asked Revish.

The question was rhetorical, since as a garden menial, the man’s mouth was padlocked shut. But he tried to answer nonetheless, and as he gibbered Revish saw that the muzzle was ill-sized, leaving just enough room to slip a mashed berry through.

‘Is it true?’ he repeated, but this time, he addressed his question to the figure who stood in the shadows of the audience chamber. ‘Did he eat from the pleasure garden?’

The branchwych limped into the light, body creaking like a great oak in a windstorm. A rusting metal collar encircled her neck, its sigils glowing pink. Stone amulets rattled in her wooden antlers.

Her voice, high and melodic, filled the chamber with birdsong.

‘I have witnessed this truth, my lord. But he is a good gardener—’

Revish held up a hand and stood, reluctantly leaving the upholstered embrace of his human-leather chair.

‘My dear seedling,’ Revish said. ‘You know I do not like killing. I have as much natural inclination to kill a man as I have to cook my own meals. The fruits of violence, like the act of feasting, I am happy to enjoy. But the labour of death is not to my taste. I am no Khornate barbarian, glorying in slaughter.’ Light danced on his mirrored armour as he approached the cowering menial. ‘But whether to kill or spare is not my choice. Our gods have laid out their ways of justice. Is that not so, darling Sybbolith?’

‘It is so,’ responded the Seeker.

‘And though those ways are cruel and capricious, mortals can do naught but follow them. You, who have your own goddess-queen, no doubt understand this.’

The branchwych hesitated, nodded.

From the floor, the hollow-cheeked menial stared at Revish’s breastplate, entranced by the sight of his own horrid reflection. He tried to speak, and the lord hushed him, placing a long finger close to his lips.

Then he opened his arms, as if accepting the divine burden. ‘My Prince Slaanesh, the god of my house, says that there can be no mercy for the disobedient. As a natural insubordinate myself, that is not to my liking, but my Prince says rule breakers must be punished. And we have one rule here.’

It happened so fast even Sybbolith flinched, a cry of ecstatic surprise escaping her shark-toothed mouth.

Revish’s hands dropped beneath his cape and the axes came spinning out.

No clumsy woodsman's tools these – they were sharp sickles, like the pickaxes used for scaling ice floes in frozen lands. So sharp were they that even as the whirling blades punched into the menial, the blood did not come immediately. Instead, it seeped slow and languid as if from a razor cut.

There was no sense wasting it, after all. Blood was a valuable ingredient.

So when his precision butchery concluded and the menial ceased to wail, Revish lost no time in asking:

‘Can we use this man, seedling? As fertiliser?’

The branchwych shook her head, staring at the slaughtered gardener. ‘He will make the fruits bitter, the spices plain.’

‘The hog trough, then,’ said Revish. ‘And I will go to the garden and count the cost.’

The concubine had already brought rose water, and he dipped his hands in the bowl to clear the blood. Aware that the meal and audience had concluded, attendants began to shift and move about their business.

Sybbolith slid up beside him, voice low. ‘My lord, a word.’

‘Not unless the words are new ones, my little horror.’

She leaned in, tiptoed so that when she whispered, her lips brushed his ear. ‘My ships have been probing the Gushing Rapids. The summer rains have made them navigable. If we provision the fleet...’

‘We’ll speak later,’ he said.

‘But lord, we agreed that this summer we would return to the search. Our foothold is secure, we can...’

‘Can’t you see I’m dealing with something, Syb?’ He pushed past her. ‘Whichever watchman spotted the menial eating my berries, give him a day in the harem.’

He drew up alongside the wych and offered his arm. She ignored it, and he guessed that she did not understand the human gesture.

Indeed, she was so much more than human. Even the issue of her name was aloof and exotic – she insisted that her people did not use forms of individual address, and after a year he still simply called her ‘seedling’ or ‘wych’.

She had fascinated him ever since he had sighted her during a raid on Neos. He could still hear her keening a war song, and picture the grass of the scorched battlefield sprouting anew beneath her bare feet.

And it was then that he knew he must possess her.

In movement and aspect she reminded him of a daemonette – she had the same otherworldly motion, a vaguely human form animated by a non-human spirit –

but she exuded a vitality the handmaids of Slaanesh lacked. Daemonettes were hungry. They took you to great heights but left you lessened. This exquisite creature, on the other hand, projected youth and vitality.

Revish had lost control. Cut his way to her, axes gouging deep into the dryads separating them. He still remembered how the blood-sap made his axe hafts sticky and his tabard stiff. How the strange-toothed wyrm living in her shoulder had lunged for him and blunted its teeth on his greave before he knocked it to the ground and pulped it with a stomp. How he'd tackled her, the strange rough bark feeling so odd under his hands as he pinned her down.

He had also taken twenty of her dryads. It had been easy enough corralling them once Sybbolith had torn their branchwraith's head from its body. His warriors had brought nets for the purpose.

He wanted them for his garden. To let him explore all the culinary pleasures of this Realm of Life.

He escorted the wych in silence through the tower's entrance hall, past tapestries that, if one looked at them too long, brought hallucinogenic glimpses of other realms. Her injured leg creaked. Ecstatic moans drifted up the corridor.

'Sounds of the harem,' chuckled Revish. 'My man gets his reward. Everyone will want to catch a thieving menial now.'

'Dost thou visit the harem?' she asked.

'Regularly, yes. It is my harem. And it is expected.'

'Then thou hast many progeny.' She nodded approval. 'Life blesses.'

'I have no children.'

She stopped, turned. As her head cocked, stone trinkets clattered in her branch-horns. 'I am sorry, but I understood that the purpose of a harem was...'

'It is.'

'Then art thou sterile?'

'No,' he said quickly, then laughed. 'The point of the act is not to produce children. It is to become lost in waves of rapture. To briefly feel the euphoric ravishment of our lord Slaanesh.'

'It seems a lot of work for little result,' said the branchwych.

'Children would... distract from the pursuit of pleasure.'

'Aye,' she agreed. 'As they should. Pleasure is not the point of life, my lord. The point of life is to create more life. A being without progeny hath no legacy.'

'Perhaps that is why we do not have children,' replied Revish, climbing the stairs of the north tower. 'To keep us rooted in the now. We are in pursuit of the infinite present. An unending ecstasy beyond time and the Mortal Realms.'

‘I see,’ said the wych. ‘Thou hast strange beliefs, Revish... and thou dost fight hard for a man without a future.’

He laughed as they stepped out on the parapet, following the fortress wall to the pleasure garden. He could see the wych breathe deeper as they stepped outside into the wind. The orchids that spilled down her wood-scalp raised, turning their faces towards the sun. Her amber eyes, dark and flat inside the fortress, lit like lanterns. He knew that here, above the walls, she could hear the songs of nature.

It thrilled him. Seeing its power work upon her. He had never met a thing, even daemons in the Realm of Chaos, that were so *of* a place.

Ghyran and the wych, the wych and Ghyran – indivisible and inseparable.

Below them, docks radiated off the island’s shore, jetties pushing into the glass-green sea in a circular pattern, like the spokes of a broken wagon wheel. An enormous star of Chaos, cluttered with the sleek, black hulls of warships.

‘Raiding season,’ said Revish.

‘Berry season,’ said the wych, and took his hand. It was warm, like a polished stone in the sun. ‘Let’s see what we have grown.’

He let her pull him towards the garden.

‘I wish I’d stripped the flesh from his bones,’ growled Revish. ‘Given him to Sybbolith, told her to take her time about it.’

‘I was away,’ said the branchwych. Even her inhuman sing-song held a tone of apology. ‘I cannot be here when they prune the dryads. Even wearing this.’ She gingerly touched the iron collar with its sigils. ‘It cannot block the loudest screams of the spirit-song. Not this close.’

A bloodcurrant shrub speared its way out of a dryad’s chest. Berries hung in bunches, crimson-black amid the whorls of serrated leaves.

‘How many did he eat?’

‘Twice the seasons,’ she replied, then recalculated. ‘Eight, as thou and thine say. Seven more in his pockets. They were served at dinner.’

He nodded. ‘This was a terrible violation.’

‘Indeed, the garden must always have balance. Clumsy harvesting, overeating, these things destroy the cycle. The garden can sustain one man eating from it, but no more.’

Revish looked at his beautiful cultivation. Twenty dryads, their humanoid forms thrust into the earth and sprouting every kind of summer fruit. Tangberries hung like dewdrops from one, while another’s arm-branches had grown long and flowered pink – crimson stonefruit now nested in the leaves. Three others,

planted hand-and-foot and woven together, formed a trellis that hung heavy with vin-grapes.

‘When will they be ready?’

‘Another month more,’ said the wych. ‘Two, if thou wishest the wine extra sweet.’

He nodded. In this long year, he had learned patience. That the pleasure of *now* was often worth sacrificing for greater delight later. He had forced the wych to plant the dryads in berry season, last year. He’d been pigheaded and eaten the fruit too early.

That had angered her. Indeed, she’d even tried to poison him. A silly thing to do. He went through food tasters almost as fast as chefs, and each morning, he had his chamber pot examined before it was dumped over the fortress wall. He’d given her the limp for that – broken the leg, let it regrow crooked through an iron corkscrew – but they had quickly come to an understanding.

He allowed her to keep her dryads alive, headless and immobile, laced with foreign plants, but still experiencing the yearly cycle so important to the sylvaneth. The garden was her domain, provided that she keep the peace and provide him with the greatest produce that had ever touched his three-lobed tongue.

Sweet cob in autumn, along with crisp apples the size of babies’ skulls. Winter spices and pom-clusters that stained his chin purple when the snows came. Hot crisproot and coiling ferns in spring, cooked savoury alongside venison. And now, the berries he had been too impatient for last summer.

Revish removed his mirrored gauntlet and reached out, feeling a leaf between his fingers. Closed it around a womb berry big as a human eyeball, feeling the tender flesh, yielding as that of a lover.

‘May I?’ he asked.

The wych nodded.

It left a residue on his fingers, this berry. So tangy that he could not help licking them clean after relishing the juices that burst on his tongue. It was all he could do to keep from plucking another, and he contented himself with sucking the seeds from his teeth.

‘Thank you for killing the man,’ said the wych.

‘You seemed hesitant.’

The wych stroked a dryad, picked a beetle off a leaf. ‘My kin do not make decisions in haste,’ she said, letting the insect scuttle over her fingers. It was greying, blighted. One of the tainted insects that occasionally rode in on the

wind, carried from Nurgle's territory. 'But though thy speed distressed me, thy calculus was correct. All life is precious...'

She trapped the beetle between two twig-like fingers, crushing it, rolling the broken body so it shredded.

'...but pests must not be tolerated in the glade,' she continued, regarding the smear left on her bark. 'My kin and queen understand that. And so does my Lord Revish.'

'So we are starting this absurdity again,' he breathed.

'It is not an absurdity,' she pressed. 'Thy god is not like the Great Blight. Unlike Nurgle, thy god wishes to cultivate. Cultivate pleasure, true, but now my lord sees how pleasure and nature intertwine.'

'This,' he gestured around them, 'is an experiment.'

'A successful one.' She stepped close.

He caught the scent of the wild orchid from the blossoms that spilled down her shoulders.

'But the pleasure garden is not thine only experiment,' said the wych. 'This whole island is a walled garden. On the mainland, Nurgle rules. His rot permeates soil and stream. Nothing grows. But my Lord Revish knows how to be a steward.'

He stepped back, light-headed. It was clumsy, this flirtation, by the standards of a Slaaneshi court. Yet he found it so enticing. Her eagerness and youth. The wholesome exuberance. Revish had spent long years in the company of those dead, those soon to be dead, and daemons who had never truly lived.

'Your Everqueen would not agree to an alliance.'

'Perhaps not the queen, no. But we in the Harvestboon Glade are young and practical. Not so tied down with grudges. If thou wert to expand – take sword against Nurgle in Invidia, cultivate it as you have this island – Harvestboon might approve. Trade peace and the exquisites of our branches in exchange for wild places left alone. And my lord... wild fruits are sweeter than those grown within walls.'

'And if they didn't agree?'

She smiled, an expression that looked both strange and frightening on the moist bark of her lips. 'Then we two could do it alone.'

The wych turned, beckoned towards the small half-cellar that he'd dug so she could grow mushrooms during the wet season. Nothing special, a few planks over a hole in the ground. They had to stoop to get inside, and Revish was shocked to see great, heart-shaped leaves covering the earth floor.

‘Dost thou know what this is, my lord?’ she said, brushing back the foliage. His breath caught. Bioluminescent glow radiated from an orb’s emerald surface. It was large, the size of a great melon or a newborn child.

‘A soulpod,’ he breathed. It must be.

‘The start of new growth,’ she said. ‘The first sowing that will bring life back to Invidia. Under thy hand, my lord. Thou said that thou had no children, but it is not true. This can be our progeny.’

Revish knelt and stroked the glassy surface, saw a coil of life move inside at the warmth of his touch. She laid her hand over his.

He could see his own face, reflected in the surface.

Sybbolith brushed past the Chosen guarding Revish’s private chamber. She did not ask to enter and they did not try to stop her. Everyone in the fortress knew what had happened to the last man who’d done that – she still wore his skin as a stocking.

She closed the door behind her.

‘I’ve told the fleet to prepare,’ she told Revish.

‘Excellent,’ he said. He tied his silk robe closed and offered a plate. ‘Candied lips? Freshly severed.’

‘I’m glad we agree,’ she said, ignoring the confections. ‘If we sail in two weeks, the rivers will still be full. We could hit the Dreamloss Realmgate, or if opportunity presents, take another run at the Gates of D–’

‘I have an alternative plan.’ He dropped into a chair and rapped a nautical map with his knuckles. ‘We sail north, to the Nothingwell Peninsula. Garrison it, prepare to cut off the southern half of Invidia and take it in the name of Slaanesh.’

Sybbolith dropped her chin, studied him with her cat eyes. ‘Turn on Nurgle. Stab the Father of Plagues in the back. Why?’

‘How better to honour the Prince of Pleasure than by giving him a place in this realm?’

‘By finding him and freeing him from his prison,’ she hissed. ‘This place has twisted you up, Revish. Ever since we came here, you’ve been eating too much, drinking too much.’

‘Pleasure is our god’s blessing, my little horror.’

‘Pleasure with purpose. Ecstasy that binds us to Slaanesh, and elevates us into his experience.’

‘I don’t feel our Prince the way I used to,’ admitted Revish. ‘Centuries ago I

loved the flesh, but it no longer thrills me. Then, those tapestries – the sacred art – but I scarce look at them now. Violence holds no interest... but a *legacy*. Syb, if I could create something–’

She raised a hand for silence, sat down across from him. ‘Revish, I have seen this before. You have served our Prince for a long while. The same things, the same sensations, do not stimulate us forever. It will come back. You will rediscover forgotten raptures. The important thing is to keep moving, to keep searching. This realm was never meant to be more than a transit to the next–’

‘The branchwych has suggested an alliance. Slaanesh and sylvaneth, giving us a continent if we turn back Nurgle’s desolation.’

She paused. ‘The plant cannot convince the Everqueen to ally with Chaos.’

‘If not, then we need no alliance. She has a soulpod,’ smiled Revish. ‘We can start our own glade. Reforest the Nothingwell. Raise our own race of Slaaneshi dryads. The land would garrison itself. It is a good plan.’

Sybbolith ran her tongue across the inside of her saw teeth. ‘Are you my lord, or not?’

‘What?’

‘Lord Revish is a conqueror. A reveller. He’s no farmer who reaps barley.’

‘We don’t grow barley–’

‘Do you remember last year? We burned everything from the coast to the Jewwound. Made a play for the Gate of Dawn. Took slaves, razed cities. Soldiers screamed your name while in the grip of nightmare. Then that wych came, and you haven’t left this island since. She’s made herself your gaoler. Removed a Slaaneshi lord from the battlefield for an entire year. She’s manipulating you.’

Revish looked at her, really looked at her, for the first time in ages. Sybbolith had changed since she’d walked the path of mutation. It was not the confidence, she had always had that; it was the divine certainty. The fact that Slaanesh had bestowed more gifts on this hellstrider than even her consort-warlord possessed.

‘The wych has offered me a future,’ said Revish. ‘Not an endless search across realms and gateways. She’s offered something of herself rather than taking.’

Silence hung between them. Sybbolith dropped a hand under the table, the hooked, retractable claws of her left hand sliding out in case it came to a fight.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘If you think she’s so wholly devoted to you.’

‘She is.’

‘Then ask something of her. Something important and painful. Tell her you want to eat the soulpod.’

‘What?’

‘Come now, Revish. Don’t claim it hasn’t occurred to you. What would it feel like to eat a soul?’ She preened. ‘Having done it, I can tell you it was... invigorating.’

‘It would be a waste.’

‘If she’s in your power, if she is so *enraptured* of you, she’ll give it. And you won’t have to take a single bite. But if she resists, you’ll know that she has her own agenda. Unless, of course, you don’t dare ask something of your own prisoner.’

Silence again.

‘I’ll give you the night, Revish. But if you don’t ask her at dawn, I’m leaving. My riders and I, we move fast. And if we move, you’ll never catch up.’

Revish came to the garden via the parapet, down the tower that connected the garden to the fortress’ battlements. It was wider than his private entrance, with enough room for the retinue that came with him.

Sybbolith stood at his shoulder, and four Chosen at his back. The great curved horns on their helmets scraped the ceiling of the tower’s spiral staircase.

The dryads rustled as they passed, the tread of armoured feet calling up unpleasant notes of nightmare in their death-dream.

‘What is this?’ asked the wych. ‘We made a pact. No warriors in this place, it disturbs—’

‘The soulpod,’ said Revish, eyes red from sleeplessness. ‘I want it.’

‘I need the correct ground to plant it,’ said the wych. Her amber eyes darted from the hellstrider to the warriors and their great axes.

‘I wish to eat it.’

‘Thou wish...’

‘To eat. Devour. Consume. I have decided to see how it tastes.’

The wych’s keen eyes darted towards Sybbolith. ‘This is her doing. She’s turned you against—’

‘Give it to me.’

‘I will not sacrifice the future for today’s pleasure.’

Revish nodded and one of the Chosen raised his double-handed axe and turned to the nearest dryad.

‘No, please—’

The dryad shrieked as the axe blade crashed into it. It warbled, screamed like an injured raptor with each blow. Even the Chosen, hardened to the death-wails of

men, stepped back from the sheer emotion of it. Dark sap flecked the grass. Bunches of bloodcurrant burst, staining the pale interior flesh-wood imperial purple. The screams continued longer than anyone expected.

The wych was on her knees, hands on her face, wailing with grief and sympathetic pain. She reached a hand out to the dryad, now nothing but twitching roots that whined like a dying hound.

Revish reached behind his cloak and drew his pointed razor-axe. 'The next I do myself.'

The wych brought the pod, cradling it to her chest, singing softly to it as if to calm its spirit. Then she handed it to Revish two-handed, giving the surface a last brush of her fingertips before stepping back.

Revish looked at the soulpod, seeing his reflection in it. Inside, something moved.

She had given it to him, true. But she had resisted. If he handed it back, said it was all a test, his weakness would be exposed.

'Well?' said Sybbolith.

He bit into rubbery surface, feeling the gooey interior flood his mouth as the internal waters broke. It tasted of loam and dirt. It was bitter.

So bitter.

And then it bit him back.

Bone-hard mandibles pierced his face. Chitinous coils wrapped his throat. Whatever had emerged from the pod, it was strangling him.

A Chosen stepped forward and grasped the wriggling, segmented body and the creature snapped away from Revish, launching itself at the new attacker, burrowing itself between the warrior's pauldron and helmet, into his throat. Blood fountained high, spraying a headless dryad as he collapsed among the roots. Other Chosen dashed forward, stomping and slashing at the fat, hard body as it slithered into the dryad grove.

It was a grub. One of those damn worms the wych had launched at him when they'd fought a year ago. She'd *tricked* him.

He looked into the mirror of his vambrace. From ear to chin, his face was gory ruin. Ivory teeth showed through the ripped flesh of his cheek. One eye, plump and purple with venom, had nearly swollen shut. His three-lobed tongue probed through the ragged flesh, tasting the iron wine of his blood.

Revish snarled at his ruined beauty, gripped his axe haft and looked for the wych.

She was already gone, darting through the grove.

Leaving a trail of laughter behind her.

Kurdwen cackled as she ran. It was no longer the youthful, songbird laugh she had affected for the past year, but the mad, crow-like bark of a wych crone old as the forest.

It had been so tiring to be young, to wear the ebullient mask of spring that Revish found so alluring. That was not who she was. Kurdwen was an autumn hag through and through, with a heart full of dry leaves and chill winds.

Indeed, even as she fled her youthful trappings fell away. The orchids on her scalp browned, shedding petals so they pinwheeled to the ground in her wake. Bark hardened and roughened. The twisted wood of her leg that was trapped inside the corkscrew – the portion she had let go dry and brittle – cracked and fell away, letting the bent limb spring supple to its full length. Her lithe, ancient form thrilled at the cast-off artifice.

And she sang, a full-throated spirit-song that roused the mutilated dryads. They were not alive, or not sentient, at least. Echoes of their former selves, raw nerves responding to their environment much like the revived skeletons of Nagash's horde. And for a year, she had been filling them with memories of their last battle – the echoes of her war song.

Now, they heard the cry again.

Dryads reached out like sea anemones, swiping at the Chaos warriors behind her. One snatched a Chosen and held him wriggling, crushed against her chest, while her neighbour punched her root claws through his breastplate over and over. Blood fell on the rich earth.

Behind her, Revish and his retinue hacked towards her, battling through the grove like men cutting a trail through jungle.

She was far ahead, nearing the entrance tower with its guards.

And as she saw their look of hesitation, she tore the lock off her nullifying collar.

Humans, even Chaos-corrupted ones, had such foolish faith in the strength of iron. After all, iron rusts. Particularly this close to the sea. Especially when a wych squeezes drops of salt water into its workings patiently, day by day, for an entire year.

The clasp came free, and she flung the circlet at one of the warriors guarding the tower steps, winging it end-over-end. He raised his shield to deflect it.

He never saw her leap at full run, never saw her coming with her whole body and whole spirit, never saw how she had broken off a tip of her own wood-antler

and held it like a dagger.

Gnarled root-feet hammered the shield with the force of a club and he went over backward. She plunged the antler through his visor slit and he choked on blood and broken teeth.

The other warrior struck at her with a mace as she crouched on the struggling man. She ducked the first blow, got in under his guard and grabbed at his throat, but he struck out with his shield boss and slammed his mace down, crushing her left arm.

She retreated.

Through the visor slit, the man's eyes betrayed fear. But this wych was unarmed and unarmoured. She'd struck at him and missed. She was wounded, sap clotting on her useless left arm. He brought up his shield and advanced on her with deadly steadiness.

But Kurdwen had not missed, and instead of a weapon, she held out something better – a bone totem, snatched from the warrior's throat.

Cold words ran through her smile. Syllables that tasted like bare branches and myrrh resin. Her wooden hand felt the amulet, but her spirit-hand felt the labyrinth of meat within him. Her fingers slithered through the warm, subterranean rivers of his organs, following the pulsing streams of blood until she caressed his greasy heart.

Then she snapped the amulet in two.

The mace dropped from nerveless fingers and she was past him, up the stairs.

She did not need to look behind her to know that Revish and his men were pursuing. Her bittergrub still lived, and through his segmented eyes she saw Revish and his Chosen surrounded, wading through a forest of scathing branches and entangling roots.

And she saw the purple streak of Sybbolith, twisting and sliding between reaching talons.

Kurdwen slammed the tower door, threw down the bar. Leapt up the spiral stairs throwing braziers and torches behind her.

Then she was in the wind, the salt kiss of free air whipping her vine braids wild. Above the walls, able to hear the songs of life, the songs of power and war these obsidian walls made dead.

And she joined the chorus.

*Arise, all ye spirits, arise from your slumber,
O children of the Everqueen, come to my call.*

*From ditch-moat and hog-pen come make thee a war-host,
To burn their black sea-steeds and crumble their wall.*

At the base of Lord Revish's private tower, the ground began to churn and sink. Keening, like the squeal of enormous predators or screeched violin notes, emanated from the sinkhole. Roots speared up, hooked the earth, and dryads pulled themselves free. Dozens of them.

They dug their talons into the curtain wall's black stonework, finger-shoots sprouting to give them purchase between the blocks, climbing upward like a swarm of beetles fleeing a rising stream. As the wave of them approached, she could feel her reserves increasing – four seasons of magical drought, and now the spring bubbled anew.

'Welcome, sisters,' she whispered.

One looked up at her and shrieked in alarm.

Kurdwen leapt high and away like a stag, the hellstrider's six-tailed whip cracking by as it missed her by a twig's breadth. She landed in a crouch, sprang backward and vaulted off her hands to avoid the disembowelling follow-up lash.

If she'd had her greenwood scythe, she could have defended herself – but it was hanging up in the audience hall, among Revish's trophies. And while she could spare enough glamour to stop a weak heart, combatting a mighty champion of Chaos was another matter entirely. Especially when she needed the magic for something greater.

So she fled, bolting along the parapet with all the energy of a hare. Got distance. Poured all of herself into her song.

*The Mirrored One lives, claim revenge for thy sisters,
Cut down in defence of our twice-hallowed glade.
The foe-men sit idle, in unguarded chambers,
So bring them the talon, and bring them the blade.*

Sybbolith followed, ducking and leaping the dryad limbs that reached for her over the battlements. She decapitated one with her clawed hand. Lashed another by the neck and tossed it into space. Grabbed a third that got too close and punched through its oaken forehead with a tongue sharp as an awl.

And when they grew too thick on the parapet, she jumped onto the sawtooth battlements themselves, leaping from promontory to promontory without slowing her gait.

Kurdwen reached the end of the parapet. Yanked at the door to Revish's private tower, found it locked.

She could turn and meet the hellstrider, or jump into the courtyard.

'Run, little wych,' howled the oncoming champion.

Kurdwen jumped, aiming for the soft manure of the hog pen, singing still.

And as she fell, the whole world rocked.

The earth below her erupted, its displacement buckling the wall's flagstones upward. An upheaval of soil and moss rose to meet her.

She hit hard, rolled, scrambled for a handhold. Felt a sharp spear pierce her thigh-branch. Still, that was purchase enough and she held on, grabbing the great wooden antler as the rest of the earth and stones fell away.

Kurdwen had not known the seed would sprout into a treelord, but she'd done everything she could to tip the chances. She'd hidden the biggest soulpod inside the menial along with every treelord lamentiri she'd hung from her antlers like meaningless trinkets. Tricked the poor man into eating the bloodcurrants. Declined using his body as fertiliser so Revish would send it to the nutrient-rich soil of the hog pen.

Even then, she couldn't be sure it would have the desired effect. Soulpods didn't work that way. But the Queen of the Radiant Wood had smiled, and now she stood on the shoulder of a newborn champion of the forest.

And she whispered what he must do.

The treelord reared his great arms back and speared the defensive wall with his root talons, green shoots unspooling, working their way in between the stonework.

Kurdwen stroked the antler, eye to eye with the champion on the parapet. Sybbolith staggered, thrown from her footing as the growing tentacles of green shifted the wall's stability. Dryads crawled away like lizards, leaving the hellstrider alone on the rocking structure.

In those jungle-cat eyes, Kurdwen saw something that looked a great deal like fear.

'Thou wert right,' she said. 'I was trouble.'

Then the treelord ripped his arms backward and the wall collapsed in on itself, stones clattering against each other with a sound not unlike the felling of great trees.

Dryads surged through the breach, scrambling over the obsidian blocks – but the hellstrider was gone. Crushed perhaps, her body pinned to the earth under immovable stones.

But Kurdwen was not so sure. Because for a fleeting moment, she thought she'd seen an impossible thing – a figure dancing on air amidst the falling stones. Leaping from block to block with feline precision, tumbling like an acrobat through the debris and towards the dry moat.

Towards the fleet.

Later they would search for Sybbolith among the burned wreckage of the docks, picking through the shattered hulls of ships that the treelord had hoisted clear of the water and hurled onto the rocky shore.

There was no trace, except for a host of dismembered dryads – and the stories.

Stories of coastal ravagers who pillaged and vanished. Riders whose serpentine mounts leapt from the deck of low-hulled ships and plunged ashore through the roiling surf.

Tales of a woman with golden cat eyes, sailing west towards the Gates of Dawn.

Revish the Epicurean strode into his audience chamber feeling *alive*.

He alone had cut his way out. Twenty dryads in the garden, more on the walls. Claw-marks scored his mirror-crystal armour. One axe had been lost, lodged in a dryad who'd taken it with her as she toppled off the wall and into the dry moat. He'd left behind the corpses of his Chosen – they had sacrificed themselves for their lord, as was their purpose. The wall had been breached, but walls could be repaired.

The important thing was he'd lost himself in the exuberance of it. He'd never been so close to death for so long, and in that liminal space he found a new passion – the thrill of survival against the odds. Adrenaline, battle-fear, would be his new addiction. His consort would be pleased.

Face bloodied, hands sticky with sap, he called out to the lithe, inhuman silhouette sitting in his throne.

'Syb! You were right. The battle-lust has returned. I feel...'

The figure leaned into the light, grinning. Stone trinkets rattled in wooden antlers.

'Thou wert saying? How dost thou feel?'

He stopped short. 'Deceiver.'

'Harsh judgement from a man who tried to devour our dear child,' said Kurdwen. She stroked the bittergrub that lay around her neck like a fox fur. It cooed softly. 'Not very pleasant of dear father, was it, my lovely? Trying to eat thine egg sac.'

She scratched it under the mandibles.

When Revish took a step forward, it turned its pincers towards him and hissed.

‘You bewitched me,’ said Revish. ‘Fed me sweets to keep me docile. Promised me children.’

‘And I have delivered.’ She swept a thorny hand around the chamber. Polished wood whispered on stone, and the forest folk emerged from behind hallucinogenic tapestries, baroque screens and captured war banners. ‘These are, in a way, our daughters.’

‘Absurd.’

‘All the things I taught thee, Revish, and thou still dost not understand.’ She stood, pushing herself to her feet with her reclaimed scythe. ‘Dost thou even know what fruit is for?’

His brow furrowed.

‘A plant must spread its seeds. So it grows a tasty morsel to attract dumb beasts to eat them. Beasts... like birds, or wild asses, or Chaos lords.’

Revish growled, raised his axe. The dryads drew closer.

‘Think of it, Revish. All those fruits that passed your table. Apples in autumn, berries in summer... all impregnated with soulpods. After all, they come in many forms. And every morning, a servant would take thy chamber pot, examine the night soil and throw it into the dry moat outside the window. An army grown under your nose.’

He sputtered.

‘I’m Kurdwen, by the by. Wilde Kurdwen. We do use names, I just don’t make a habit of giving mine to men that consort with daemons.’

He flung himself at her, wild, furious, screaming at the edge of exhaustion.

She turned his blow and dipped the sickle into his mouth, hooking him through his torn cheek like a landed fish. Dragged him staggering across the audience chamber and threw him into his throne. Vines tightened around his wrists and ankles. His face went white.

‘Please, no, please,’ he begged. ‘I... I can be a partner. Keep clear of your woods. I’m a good steward.’

‘A good steward,’ the wych cackled. ‘This *good steward* deforested this island to build his docks. This *good steward* diverted a river to build his fortress of pleasure. This *good steward* looked at us as nothing but foodstuffs.’

‘I can be of use, I promise.’

‘Oh yes,’ she smiled. ‘And I know just the role.’

It is known on maps as Hermit Island, but for as long as folk can remember, the people of the Jade Kingdoms have called it Wych Isle.

Deep forests cover it, gnarled roots extending to the rocky shore. Yet despite this abundance, it is tradition that it is unwise to cut timber there, or spend the night ashore.

Those who beach on the isle by day have seen strange sights. The broken ribs of great ships tangled in the underbrush. Black foundation stones, long dismantled by root and vine.

But the talented trail master, or unluckily lost, may find another structure. Four walls still standing, closed with a rusted iron gate set with sculpted ivy leaves. Trees choke the interior, soaring above the old walls.

At its centre, in the oldest oak of all, can be found a suit of crystalline armour halfway swallowed in the bark, as if melting into the wood. Long ago, it's said, a warrior died leaning back against the trunk, and over the long centuries the tree grew around him. Devouring and digesting him over slow ages.

And atop the armour rests a skull, sunken back into the bark.
Its jaw hangs open, they say, as if in a centuries-long scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Rath is a freelance writer from Honolulu who is currently based in Hong Kong. Though mostly known for writing the YouTube series *Extra History*, his credits also include numerous articles and a book for the U.S. State Department. ‘The Garden of Mortal Delights’ is his first story for Black Library.

An extract from *Sylvaneth*.



The rotling roared out a challenge and Felyndael, Guardian of the Waning Light, turned to meet it. They always sought to challenge him. It was not bravery, he thought, so much as hunger. Hunger for challenge, hunger for conquest... hunger for death. They were like the roots of a blighted tree, still stretching for nourishment even though the trunk was dead. They belonged dead, but could not die. He gestured contemptuously, and the rotling lumbered towards him.

Around him, his fellow tree-revenants fought with other rotlings, leaping and slashing among the clumsy plague-lovers. Scarred Caradrael bisected a bloated warrior from crown to groin as lithe Yrael cut the sagging throats of three with a single blow. Daemoniac ichor splashed across the wondrous curved structures of the reed-city of Gramin as the rotlings stumbled and died beneath the blades of his twenty-strong kin-band.

Felyndael felt a surge of satisfaction as his warriors fought with their customary flowing grace. They flickered in and out of sight, lunging and striking at their opponents from every direction at once. They were veterans of the withering years, and could easily dispatch three times their number in open combat.

He turned his attention back to his challenger as the brute, bulbous and clad in stinking furs and pitted metal, came at him in a clumsy rush, roaring out the name of its foul god. It seared the air with its murk. An axe swept down, and Moonsorrow rose to meet it. The ancient blade hummed with strength and struck with the force of an avalanche. The jagged blade of the axe shattered apart. The rotling reeled back, pustule-dotted jaw working in shock beneath the rim of its foetid helmet. Flabby paws waved in hapless defiance as Felyndael darted forwards, quick as the wind.

Moonsorrow screamed in joy as it pierced the noisome bulk. Flesh, muscle and bone parted like smoke before the bite of the sword. The rotling hunched forward with a shrill wheeze, clawing helplessly at Felyndael's bark-clad arms. Wriggling worms spilled from its mouth and pattered to the ground as its

stinking ichor gushed from the wound.

Ably done, noble one, Yrael thought, her compliment pulsing through Felyndael's mind as he pulled Moonsorrow free of the rotling's cancerous body. He let the creature sag to the ground and looked around.

I am not alone in that, my sister, Felyndael thought. Around him, his tree-revenants finished off the last of the dead thing's companions, killing the bellowing brutes with graceful savagery. The rotlings had become separated from the flow of the horde now occupying the circular streets of Gramin, and thus were easy prey for him and his kin-band as they erupted from the spirit paths close to the heart of the city.

The reed-city was as much a thing of Ghyran as Felyndael and his warriors. Alarielle's magics had constructed it in ages past. She had drawn up the reeds that grew thick and wild in the shallows of Verdant Bay and woven them together into a great metropolis of canals, bridges and high, sweeping arches, spreading outwards from the Basilica of Reeds at Gramin's heart. All as a gift for the mortals who had sworn to care for that which she had entrusted to them in ages past – a clutch of slumbering soulpods.

It was a duty that the citizens of Gramin had upheld until the final days of the withering years, when the rotlings had come from the sea. Their plague ships had clustered like maggots along the shore, befouling the green waters of the lagoon, kept pure until then by the budding soulpods. The raiders swept through the city with fire and axe, killing or enslaving all who inhabited it.

Felyndael's grip on his sword tightened at the thought. Though they had not been of his soil, the mortals had been caretakers, even as the sylvaneth were. They had not deserved such a fate, and he wished that he had been there. Perhaps– no. The season was done, and the cycle continued. Though his heartwood cried out for vengeance for the atrocities of the past, his task now was more important than simple slaughter.

The raiders had left the city itself – and that which even now slumbered beneath it – untouched, after scouring it of all mortal life. Perhaps they had deemed it unimportant, or indefensible. Regardless, they had retreated to the great sargasso, where they had raised foul citadels upon the floating weeds and left the reed-city and its hidden treasure to sit silent and undisturbed.

Until now. Until Alarielle had awoken, and her scream had set the skies to burning and the winds to roaring. As the echoes of that scream spread throughout Ghyran, the rotlings had returned in their scabrous galleys, stinking of ruin, and their return endangered the slumbering grove of hidden soulpods.

Now the city shuddered in the grip of a malaise, and the waters beneath screamed without ceasing.

Moonsorrow trembled sympathetically in his grasp. He could feel the ghost of the mountain for which the sword was named stir within the blade. A sorrowful weight, a millennium of tragedy, condensed and compacted into the weapon he now held. A burden and an honour both. It sang to him sometimes, when the moonlight struck the blade just so, and the din of battle had faded.

But it was not singing now. Even if it had been, Felyndael could hear but one song – the war-song, the song of the reaping. Alarielle's voice resounded through him, branch and root, summoning him, driving him to war. It had been centuries since he had last heard the Everqueen's voice. It was like a gale wind, ripsawing through the realmroots. She sang and screamed and whispered all at once, crying out in wordless command.

It was a command he had no difficulty obeying. Indeed, he had never stopped fighting. Felyndael of the Fading Light had never set aside his sword, had never set down roots or shrunk into the dark and quiet like many of the others. He had fought without ceasing since the first rotling had set ragged claw on the good soil of Ghyran. And he would not stop until the last of them were mulch beneath his feet. He would not stop until they had been punished in full for their crimes against life itself.

The sword hummed in his grip, the voice of the mountain murmuring to him. Calming him, settling its weight upon the rage that rose up within him like a wildfire, snuffing it. But not for long, he suspected. It grew more difficult to ignore with every turn of the seasons. The harder he fought, the harder it became to do anything but fight.

He had become a hollow thing, burned black and made brittle by war. But he would serve until his roots shrank and his branches cracked. Calmer now, Felyndael examined the body at his feet. Why had the rotlings come back? The servants of Chaos always sought to destroy the soulpods, when they knew of them. But that was not the case here. He would have sensed it if the soulpods were in any direct danger. Something else was going on.

One of his warriors, Lathrael, stretched out her hand. *The air is wrong here*, she thought. Her words pulsed gravely through the connection that bound them.

It is sour, Caradrael the Scarred thought, with the mental equivalent of a shrug. *Like everywhere the rotlings infest. And so?* Caradrael's bark had been kissed by fire long ago, and it had made him short-tempered. *Let us kill them, and cleanse this place.*

Their numbers are great, Yvael thought.

Then our vengeance will be all the greater. Caradrael's thought was the hiss of a slashing branch.

No. Lathrael is right. It is different, Felyndael thought. *Like the calm before a storm. It trembles, like a thing afraid. Wait – something is–*

The air shuddered as unseen bells tolled. The sound of it was every axe-thud, every root-snap and crackle of flame. It was the sound of bark sloughing, curling, decaying and the scream of dry grass in the burgeoning. Felyndael nearly dropped Moonsorrow as he clutched at his head. The others were similarly afflicted by the droning reverberation.

As the tree-revenants recovered their wits, horns brayed in the distance, and drums thudded. The rotlings were agitated. But not, Felyndael thought, by his kin-band. Something else had come to Gramin. *Come, brothers and sisters,* he thought. *Let us see what has our foes so excited.*

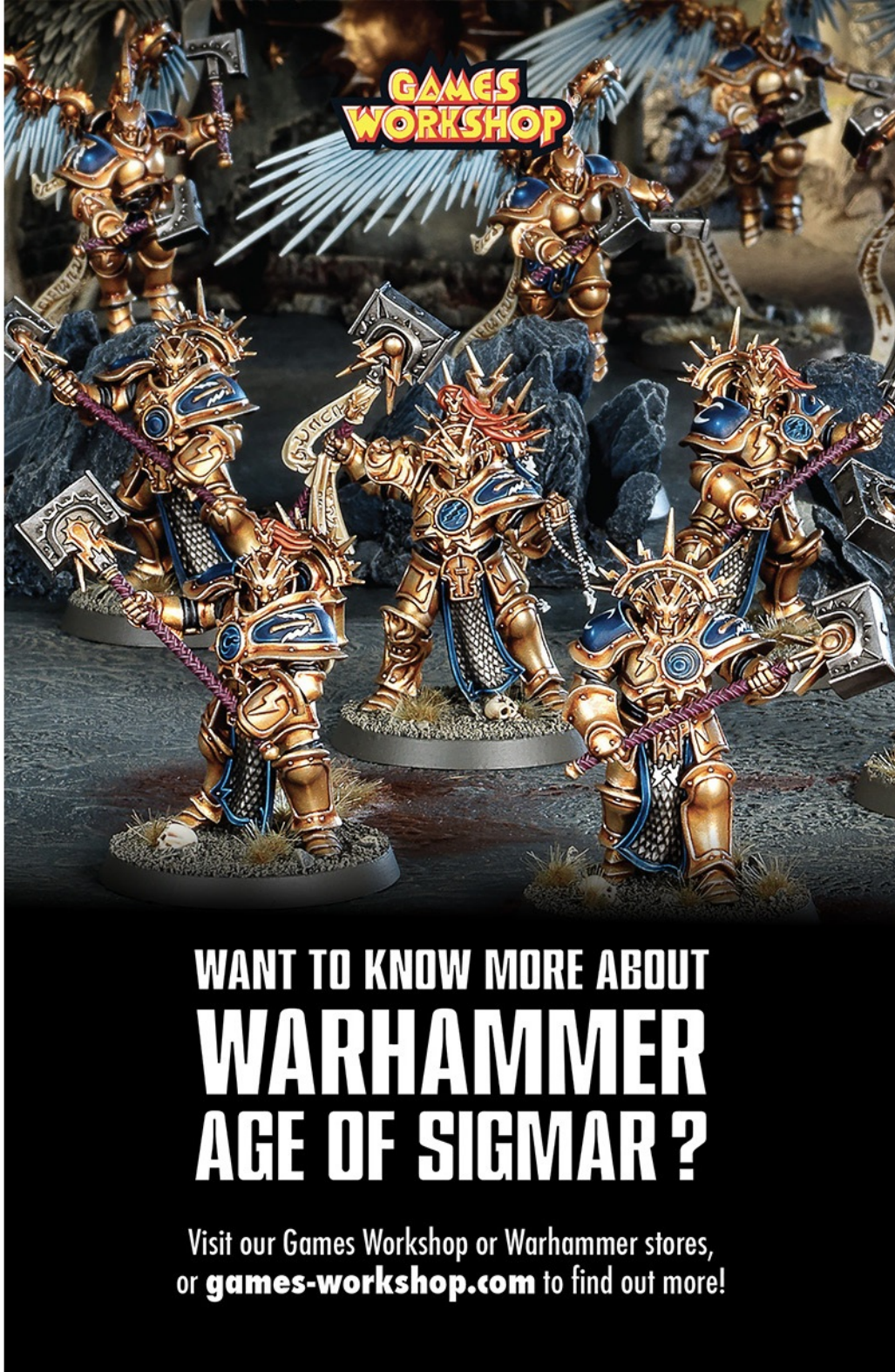
Click here to buy [Sylvaneth](#).

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



**Sign up today for regular updates on the
latest Black Library news and releases**

SIGN UP NOW



WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT
WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR?

Visit our Games Workshop or Warhammer stores,
or [games-workshop.com](https://www.games-workshop.com) to find out more!

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Nuala Kinrade.

The Garden of Mortal Delights © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2019. The Garden of Mortal Delights, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, Warhammer, Warhammer Age of Sigmar, Stormcast Eternals, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78999-681-4

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at

blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at

games-workshop.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.