



WARHAMMER

AGE OF SIGMAR

AN ASTRAL TEMPLARS STORY

BEAR EATER

DAVID GUYMER



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BEAR EATER

David Guymer

The sun was searing bright, the sky a lens of crystal blue, shaped by gods for the glorification of their oasis of light. Towers of white stone with domed roofs of mosaic gold shone with a splendour that stole a man's breath, and drew sweat even from an immortal's brow. The trek across the Sea of Bones had been arduous, but dust and battle damage aside, the dozen Astral Templars still standing could outshine any Mortal Realm for glory.

Liberators in heavy armour of deep amethyst and gold marched in silent ranks; their shields were up in defiance of the sun, hammers strapped across their backs, heads high. The Prosecutors flanked them, walking in lockstep, but with the mechanisms of their wings unfurled, enhancing their size threefold. Their pinions sizzled with god-wrought might. To the rear came a pair of Judicators, the stocks of their crossbows each held in one heavy gauntlet, the stirrups to their shoulders. In the absence of the wrath of Azyr, the weapons were bright but otherwise inert arcs of blessed sigmarite. Impressive regardless, their function plain enough to anyone who knew war.

Even they were but a foretaste.

Hamilcar Bear-Eater marched a stride ahead, his helmet carried under the crook of his arm. His face was tattooed and bearded, his thick pile of red hair sweaty under the desert sun. His teeth were painted black, and he grinned for the awed men and terrified children that lined the Sacred Mile of Jercho to witness the return of Sigmar. Stick-figure representations of sacred beasts marked the rugged sigmarite of his armour, sandblasted, sun-faded, dim now as his own memory of the land and people that had spawned them. It clanked as

he walked, the strapping loosened against the heat, his warding lantern banging on the opposite hip. A cloak of tattered Carthic bearskin trailed limply over one shoulder.

Larger than life, men had once called him, when he too had still been a man.

What then, he wondered, could they call him now?

The soldiery of Jercho lined the approach in their finest war gear. They were armoured in short-sleeved leather lorica and skirts sewn with bronze plates. Masks of the same metal, cast in the likeness of a rising sun, covered the upper halves of their faces, eyes peering through slit holes, only their frowns visible. The exposed skin of their arms, legs and chins was the brown of baked bread. Several ranks stood flawlessly to attention under the punishing midday heat – the sun was always high over Jercho – a line of spearmen that ran the Sacred Mile all the way from the Gates of Noon and the citadel of Jercho itself. Archers with long composite bowstaves made of hewnbeam and grindworm tooth tracked the procession from the rooftops.

The Astral Templars were not the only ones intent on making an impression.

‘There certainly are a lot of them,’ muttered Broudiccan.

The Decimator-Prime was a man of heroic stature and few words, which was what Hamilcar, a man of many words of tremendous import, appreciated about him most. His helmet bore a dent from a battle with the sankrit, a reptilian people whose small empire straddled the northernmost reaches of the Sea of Bones. The sankrit had clawed knuckles, and the blow to Broudiccan’s faceplate had left a deep gouge across the mask’s impassive mouth that only deepened the warrior’s gloomy aspect.

‘There always are.’ Hamilcar thumped his breastplate with a clenched fist, making one of the nearby spearmen start. ‘There is only ever one of Hamilcar.’ The granite-white gryph-hound, Crow, that padded alongside him growled in apparent assent, or perhaps in hunger as it considered the soldiers of Jercho.

‘Think of what might be achieved if these people can be returned to Sigmar’s fold,’ said Thracius, last surviving Prime of his Liberators, his armour sand-polished and aglow with Sigmar’s energy, his manner characteristically ebullient. ‘Look upon Jercho’s wealth. And these towers, so grand, earthly twins to those of Sigmaron herself! Two Mortal Realms have I waged holy war upon, Hamilcar, and never seen the like of Jercho – a nation of city-states, as yet unmarred by the Age of Chaos. Their confidence and power would be a boon to Sigmar’s, equal to anything we have achieved in Ghur thus far.’

Ever restless, Hamilcar’s mind turned back.

He had been dispatched to the Realm of Beasts to reconquer the cities of the Carthic Oldwoods and oversee their resettlement in Sigmar’s name. He had succeeded, for Hamilcar always succeeded, only to see that great work undone as one by one those cities fell to marauding bands of ogors, the orruk hordes of the Great Red, and then, the deathblow, to the undying legions of Mannfred von Carstein.

It had been Mannfred that had slain him, in the final battle for once-mighty Cartha, and the ignominy of his defeat lingered more than the appalling injuries required to slay one as mighty as he. He was troubled, more often than

he would admit, by dreams of that day. He would awake, clad in sweat, his halberd gripped so fiercely that if the dreams did not cease then one day even blessed sigmarite would snap. A lesser immortal would have broken, but it was not often that the gods forged men of Hamilcar's mettle. Aware, as a god must be, of the evil that plagued his greatest champion, Sigmar had granted him swift catharsis, giving him the vanguard of the bladestorm that had driven Mannfred from the Sea of Bones and, in alliance with the hosts of Arkhan the Black, broken the back of the Great Red. The quest to bring the vampire to heel went on, and, though it had aggrieved Lord-Relictor Ramus of the Hallowed Knights, there was none better than Hamilcar to pursue it.

It was not about vengeance. Nor was it even about restitution; in his heart he knew that the memory of his death would be with him to the end of days.

He was a hunter, and the vampire was his prey.

'The Hammers of Sigmar and the Celestial Vindicators claim the realms for Sigmar,' Broudiccan grumbled, 'while we battle half-sentient lizard people for an arid waste that no one desires and one worthless night-walker that time forgot to slay.'

'This is where the glory will be, brothers,' Hamilcar declared.

'What makes you so sure?'

Hamilcar spread his arms, his armour shining under the bright sun. The answer was so blindingly apparent that he did not need to speak it. He laughed instead, clapping Broudiccan on the pauldron so sparks of lightning played through the fingers of his gauntlet as he pushed his brother on.

Say one thing for Hamilcar Bear-Eater: he is not greedy with his glory.

The Knight-Heraldor, Frankos, sounded a note on his long, curved horn, the standard of the Knight-Vexillor held proudly aloft as Hamilcar and his best marched into the Plaza Solar.

The great plaza of marble and tinkling fountains was set in the sultry wind-shade of the citadel's ramparts. They were immense. The white stone of the walls was dazzling. The arrowslits were framed with gold. Fantastical banners of bright and daring colours fluttered against the bright blue sky, but the Solar itself felt no wind. The ornamental fountains sounded a note of coolness, but heat pressed down like a mailed fist.

Frankos' herald faded into the still air. Silence fell, breathless, with a clatter of sigmarite as Stormcasts shifted in their armour for relief from the heat.

Shielding his eyes, Hamilcar looked up the huge curtain walls to where a robed man with a bald head stood with his lips to a trumpet of gold-plated ivory. And there, on the highest rampart, surrounded by his banners and servants and beneath a shaded canopy, was the throne of Joraad el Ranoon.

The sun-king.

The king of Jercho was clad in a loose banyan of green silk, the hem and sleeve decorated with a chequer pattern of white and green. His arms were heavy with jewelled torques, his neck wound with heavy necklaces of gold. A golden mask that emitted rays like those of the sun covered his face in full, and a crown sat upon his head.

Joraad leaned forward and his voice, when he spoke, boomed from all

around, hundreds of voices, echoing from the fine statuary and feminine caryatids of the Solar.

Hamilcar turned his gaze to see the men and women arrayed in royal livery above the square. He had been told of this. The Rays of the sun-king: bonded by ritual magic to the will of their lord.

'I, Joraad, heir to the reign of Ranoon, regent of Jercho and king of earth and sky, welcome the embassy of Sigmar to my throne. Come in peace, brothers long lost, returned to us now by the blessings of the gods.'

A stilted breeze stirred the high banners. Hamilcar licked the salty dryness from his lips and squinted over the silent crowds. He had been expecting a cheer, a dutiful applause. Something.

'Why does he sit in shade while we bake?' Broudiccan murmured. 'Is he the sun-king or is he not?'

Chuckling at his brother's bleak humour, Hamilcar stepped forward. He let the quiet linger a moment longer. Then he took a deep breath; his lungs swelled, his diaphragm dropped.

Broudiccan and Thracius took a step back.

'And Sigmar's greeting to you!' His voice was a hammer beaten against the shieldwall of the sky. The pennants above the castle gatehouse fluttered. He looked up to the sun-king, eyes narrowed and shot through with red by the noon glare. 'We are the eternal of Azyr, and by the might of Sigmar we have returned!'

The sun-king peered down, nonplussed, appearing to remonstrate with one of his many fan-waving attendants, then waved a hand covered in rings towards the gatehouse and some garrison commander out of sight.

'Here we go,' Broudiccan muttered grimly as the gates creaked apart in a rattling of chains and a golden crack of light.

A block of half-masked soldiers encased in full plate armour of flawless gold and wielding wickedly curved polearms marched forth. A column with a rank of ten seamlessly became two columns with a rank of five, the marchers splitting to assume positions either side of the gate. A mighty *bang* reverberated about the Solar as two-hundred men of the Solar Guard smacked the butts of their weapons into the ground, turned forty-five degrees to left or right, and then stamped their boot to the flagstones.

The gryph-hound, Crow, lashed his tail.

Hamilcar rubbed the beast's heavy beak to soothe him. 'You heard the king.' He turned to Broudiccan and Thracius with a grin. 'He asked us to come in peace.'

The sealing of the gates actually brightened the gatehouse considerably. Natural light poured in through tall, outwards slanted windows, then burned like fire across the doors' gold and electrum panelling. The walls were that same pitiless white. Hamilcar grimaced and held up a hand as a woman in jewelled armour approached through the files of Solar Guard, bent light streaming from her armour's faceted edges in a dazzling spray of colours.

'I had expected to be welcomed by General Sarmiel el Talame,' he grunted.

'It was his legion that treated with us in the border deserts of the sankrit. He was the one who arranged this audience once we had explained your city's danger.'

The woman did not answer.

Everything about her spoke of remoteness, light without warmth.

Steeling himself with a deep breath, he turned to look directly at her.

Within her searing aura, he made out a smudge of darkness, skin, olive brown, and long dark hair ornamented with some kind of gold. Tears began to fill his eyes as he found the glittering lines of powdered gold drawn from the corners of the woman's eyes. One of the Rays of the sun-king. He gave her a pained grin.

Crow, he held by the scruff to settle his growls.

'The sun-king, Joraad el Ranoon, eternally glorious king of earth and sky, commands the surrender of your arms,' she said.

Hamilcar rubbed his eyes and frowned. Sarmiel had not prepared them for that.

In addition to her armour, the woman bore an emerald-hilted tulwar, though it was belted in a scabbard of jewelled silk and could only have been ceremonial in function. Hamilcar squinted to the guards. He had counted about fifty outside, but if there had been any more waiting inside he could not tell, and one gold-armoured figure blurred into another here. How they saw *him*, he couldn't fathom.

He supposed they got used to it.

'You don't draw the teeth from a bear and expect it to behave.'

Broudiccan snorted, and clutched his massive thunderaxe possessively.

'Weapons are not permitted in the presence of the sun-king,' the woman said.

'Perhaps we should oblige them in this,' Thracius counselled.

'Am I able to speak to el Ranoon directly through...?' Hamilcar waved vaguely over the blankly staring thrall. 'This? An evil you are ill prepared for rides before us. Trickery is his weapon. Even your great citadel cannot be counted a haven. We are here to defend your kingdom, to test the sharpness of the vampire's wits on Hamilcar's blade.'

The woman's eyelids fluttered, as if the host sought to wake but couldn't. 'The sun-king will settle for your blade, Lord-Castellant, if your followers will submit to having their weapons bound to the sheaths.'

Hamilcar conceded. He tossed his halberd to a barely visible Solar Guard and with a nod of assent bade Broudiccan stow his axe. The woman waved a gauntleted hand – the light in its path cut to daggered purples and greens – and called for silk for binding.

'Divine majesty.' A captain of the Solar Guard crouched to one knee as men moved amongst the glowering Astral Templars bearing bolts of silk, then bowed his head to the Ray as though he addressed his king in person. 'The crowds have been cleared from the Solar. My men have secured the plaza and the legions return the people to the city.'

'You have done well.' Her eyes rolled backwards for a spell, the attentions of

the puppet-lord momentarily elsewhere, and then the dolorous clangour of gongs and horns sounded from the ramparts.

Hamilcar squinted towards the high windows. Treating with a sovereign power was one part fine words to nine parts theatre.

And Hamilcar Bear-Eater knew theatre.

'I was not advised on any further ceremony.'

The Ray nodded, as if to herself, then backed away. The pain in Hamilcar's eyes receded appreciably. A few paces back she drew her ornamental blade from its sheath. It was a beautiful thing, as if drawn whole from the heart of a star.

'The return of Sigmar and the elder pantheon has been awaited for centuries. Their disappearance was never explained to us.' She lowered her head, and raised her sword flat across her palms to be kissed by the light that poured through the windows. 'The people will not stand idle. Better they remain ignorant of what passes between us. I am the sun-king of Jercho, imposter, and Sigmar is dead to me.'

Hamilcar bellowed as the woman swung for him. He raised an arm. Sparks tore from the sword's curved blade and it slid down the angle of his vambrace. A twist, a shove, and he threw the mortal off. She spun once before she landed, light spearing from her as though a cut diamond had been flicked across the face of the sun, any idea of pursuit discouraged with burning pins to the eyes. With a grunt, Hamilcar pulled up. Pain turned his face behind the shade of his own pauldron, eyes narrowed to tear-filled slits.

Dull things in their glorious plate, the Solar Guard moved in.

There was a reluctance to their step, but they came anyway, a reminder of why Hamilcar had always despised biddable warriors, served up in gold.

Whatever orders they had been given it was clear they had been told to execute them quietly, for without a cry or an oath they drew back their polearms and charged. Hamilcar was not about to oblige them their desire for silence.

Say one thing for Hamilcar Bear-Eater: he was loud.

With a bellow that caused the panelling on the gates behind him to rattle and the imprisoned moon dragon of Jercho to shift in its chains, he backhanded an incoming polearm from his chest, then drove his elbow into its wielder's helmet with force enough to crack the man's skull against his spine. Thracius shattered another's breastplate with a punch that threw him into the wall. The Liberator Prime beat on his breastplate and roared. Disappointment had made him wrathful, and Hamilcar was almost glad that he did not have a weapon. With an inchoate beast-sound Thracius dragged a knight from his comrades by the point of his polearm, then dashed him against the ceiling.

Even unarmed, the Stormcasts were proving more than the elite warriors of Jercho had been prepared for.

With the courage of one who bore no share of danger, the Ray exhorted her faltering soldiers to press that attack. 'They are unarmed. Bring down one, just one, and the sun will shine forever on you all.' Her blade wove a dazzling pattern of sunsteel and diamond. It was a struggle just to look at her. Crow

drew onto its haunches to leap for her, only for Hamilcar to throw his arm down across him like a barrier.

‘Down.’

The woman laughed coldly. ‘As the sun forever shines, so is Sigmar prideful.’

‘I am not Sigmar. Though the resemblance is marked.’

The thrall leapt forwards. Hamilcar unclipped his warding lantern just as the woman came within reach. The heavy sigmarite shutters struck her a mighty blow across the jaw, and she hit the floor like a pouch of gemstones. Hamilcar walked towards her recumbent form, rubbing his eyes, as Broudiccan and Thracius saw to the last of the Solar Guards.

‘Could Mannfred have worked his claws so deep so soon?’ asked Broudiccan. The giant Decimator was on one knee, looking over his shoulder as he sat an unconscious knight against the wall.

‘Mannfred would have known better. He would have sent more men.’ Blinking quickly, he turned to the downed woman. ‘Tell me why—’

Before he could finish, a knife appeared in the woman’s hand. Hamilcar drew back, but then, eyes glassed by distance, she ran the knife across her own throat. A red line appeared, and the glaze in her eyes cleared as the controlling spirit chose that moment to forsake her body. Its parting gift was a few moments of horrified incomprehension as the woman spluttered and gagged and clawed at Hamilcar’s boot as if he had the power to save her. And then she was still.

Hamilcar clicked his tongue.

He had died one time too many to be moved by barbarity now.

‘Whatever the reason, the sun-king wants us dead.’

‘Agreed,’ said Thracius.

Broudiccan spat on the ground as he rose. ‘And they say that Chaos never reached here.’

‘Chaos doesn’t always march with an army,’ said Hamilcar. ‘You can travel the seven realms to the farthest winterland and still find that Chaos got there first.’

‘Then we remove its stain from our boot heel,’ said Broudiccan, grimly.

‘Agreed,’ said Thracius.

Hamilcar and his brothers looked up to see Crow pacing restively before the electrum panelling of a heavy wooden door. The gryph-hound stared at Hamilcar. Intelligence and aggression in its eyes. Hamilcar grinned.

Retrieving his halberd, Hamilcar kicked the doors in. They smashed outwards and splintered against the walls of a corridor. Immediately, he recoiled. It was a blistering desert of pastel stone and points of gold without colour or finish, such was the unnatural intensity of light that blazed through its enormous windows. Despite the pain in his eyes, Hamilcar marvelled. No army could storm the sun-king’s citadel and prevail. No agent or saboteur could make it this far and navigate any further undiscovered.

‘Some ambassadors we turned out to be,’ said Thracius, sorrowfully.

‘Ambassadors.’ Hamilcar gave a snort. ‘Describe me thus again and I’ll rinse

your mouth with sand.'

Broudiccan adjusted the sit of his dented helm and regarded them both sourly.

'The sun-king seeks to thwart our great task and now he will pay for his crime. Such is the rule of Hamilcar!' Hamilcar turned to his men, lifting his voice, and holding his halberd high. 'We will bleed him, brothers. And give his kingdom to Sigmar!'

'To Sigmar!' they bellowed in return.

'*Hamilcar!*' he roared back at them, until the names were interchangeable.

His heart beat faster than the continuing medley of the sun-king's horns and gongs as Crow tore off down the corridor. Hamilcar powered after him, the ground-eating stride of a demigod, his warriors close behind. Joraad could be anywhere, but he would know exactly what was loose in his citadel. Through a door and the corridor became another, great open space, its windows washing it with molten gold. Hamilcar staggered, another blow to eyes that were still raw. There was a gargling cry from ahead, short-lived, then a slam of gryph-hound against metal, against stone wall. Hamilcar stepped over the savaged Solar Guard and into a staircase. It was marginally darker inside, luminous rather than blinding, dark enough to see provided one shared the sight with superimposed images of his eyeballs' veins.

The Astral Templars clattered down the stairs.

Hamilcar broke open another door.

It was some kind of receiving hall. A large wooden table was arrayed with nuts, dates and cured meats, presented as artworks on golden platters. Sunlight fell through slanted windows like taffeta ribbons, along with a natural breeze. A marble statue of womanly splendour poured water into a font from a horn of plenty. The cool chuckle of running water was a delight, so unexpected that Hamilcar almost charged right through the door and into the table.

The spread teetered on its platters.

His stomach stirred in sudden interest.

The Sea of Bones had been a journey to tax even the limitless constitution of the Stormcast Eternals and he had taken little but water and salted sankrit since. With an act of will that impressed even himself he ignored the growls of his stomach to focus on those of Crow, and the pound of armoured footsteps approaching from the other door across from the far end of the table.

'Judicators, left and right.'

With exaggerated cutting gestures of his hand he directed the Judicators to either side of the long table, then leapt onto it two-footed. The elaborate vittle sculptures descended to the floor with a crash. He kicked aside a pyramid of dates that had somehow remained standing and twirled his halberd. The Judicators' boltstorm crossbows sparked and whined as bolts of azyrite energy materialised in their tracks, fizzing against aetheric strings that were suddenly taut.

'Loose on my order,' Hamilcar bellowed, for there was no warrior who could not be improved by heeding the example of Hamilcar. 'I claim the city of Jercho for Sigmar. The fewer of its people I have to kill, the greater will be his

prize.'

With a crashing of gold-barred timbers, a phalanx of leather and bronze-clad common soldiery fell through the far door. 'Hold!' roared Hamilcar, and the mortal legionaries checked back in disarray at the monstrous visage he must have presented.

Pushing and cussing, a slightly bent old man draped in black silks with light silver vambraces and coif forced his way up from the rear ranks. 'Is this the same legion that crushed the sankrit at Heliopolis, first through the breach at Anatoly? If I didn't know better, then I-' The newcomer hesitated as he saw Hamilcar up on the dining table. Without tearing his eyes away, he too gestured his men to stand down. With clear relief, they did so. 'Lord-Castellant,' he said.

Hamilcar might have laughed. He hadn't even been as pleased to see the man when he'd first stumbled into him, blind with thirst, lost and half-mad from a sun that never set.

'Sarmiel! Praise whoever you like for you!'

The Jerchese general did not return Hamilcar's welcome. 'There were reports of fighting in the gatehouse.'

A shrug. 'That was us.'

'I vouched for you before the sun-king himself. Do you know what that means? A dozen Solar Guard are dead!'

'At least twice as many still live. Is that the work of invaders?'

Sarmiel hesitated at that, Hamilcar saw. He already doubted the truth of his reports or he would have come in fighting and to hell with explanations.

That was all the opening Hamilcar needed.

He had mastered his rhetoric in debate with the God-King himself, the Sigmarabulum crowded to its rafters by the admiring folk of Azyr, there to witness a bout between champions. They were a dozen spear-lengths apart, Hamilcar and the mortal man, but he lowered his halberd and extended a hand in friendship.

'You remember the day we met. You remember what you said to me? I know you do because you had to tell me again after you had given me water and I became sensible.'

A nod. 'That to have crossed the Sea of Bones you could only have been sent by Sigmar.'

'You had me at your mercy. Now I have you at mine.'

His halberd tinked as its blade touched the flagstones.

Sarmiel appeared to sag in surrender. No sooner had he done so, however, than the stoop he had been carrying seemed to evaporate off him. He sheathed his sword with a shake of the head. 'I doubt I could stop you anyway. Not with this lot.' A glare at his men.

'I didn't want to be the one to say it.' Hamilcar grinned.

'I knew something was amiss when el Ranoon removed me from your honour guard. No. Before then. Since he moved his court to the Moon Palace.'

'Moon Palace?'

'It is where the first sun-king imprisoned the night.'

Hamilcar and Broudiccan shared a look.

‘Take us there.’

Hamilcar did not even realise he had been asleep.

He gasped, fighting with nothing, arms bulging as he fought to drive the... *something* from his breastplate. There was a pain in his heart. Black iron cracked his ribs like the shell of a nut and dug for the soft beating pulp within. With a roar he lashed out, his halberd having somehow found its way into his hand, and clove at the Abyssal’s neck. The splitting of stone and the crack as it hit the ground broke the dream logic, and he blinked the bloody image of his murderer, Ashigorath, back into nightmare.

In its place came the prattling of a fountain, the click and chirrup of insects, the rustle of leaves. Moonlit petals crept over the ledges of windows that faced in from no part of the fortress that Hamilcar could remember seeing. He held his chest and drew a deep breath. The air was jasmine-scented, as cool as dead iron. He looked back to the steel-barred portal that el Talame’s key had seen them past.

‘Here is where the night is bound,’ said the old general. ‘And everything that goes with it.’

‘Fitting,’ Hamilcar grunted.

Broudiccan and the others said nothing. Hamilcar knew no fear. They knew better than to doubt it.

The fountain he had heard was a few score yards from the portal, in a column of moonlight that the trees seemed to have twisted themselves to avoid. He walked to the basin. Kneeling, he splashed cool water into his face. As the ripples cleared, he saw himself looking into a face that he almost recognised: the tawny beard, scuffed by serried lines of scars, the thorny branch tattoo that swirled around his eye.

The eye however, he avoided looking into too deeply.

Say one thing for Hamilcar Bear-Eater: he wasn’t perfect. He dashed the reflection with his gauntlet.

Memories of death and reforging had never before troubled him while he had been awake. Was he awake in this place? He wondered, briefly, if el Talame ever slept and if he did, if he dreamed.

Crow whined up at him as he rubbed his breastplate.

Sigmar, would the dreams never leave him?

He turned to el Talame. ‘The sun-king. Point me at him.’

The general pointed through a crumbling stone arch. He was afraid to be here, but he marshalled it well, achieving as much as Hamilcar with far less in his making. Determined to be the champion of a god that warriors would kneel to, he shrugged the ache aside, then rose, flicking dream water from his fingers, and ducked under the arch.

The fact that they moved through the heart of the citadel of Jercho, or some timeless, dreamscaped version of it, was artfully masked by weeping orchids and clambering vines. Night birds twittered in backwards verse and things both ageless and unseen scampered amongst the branches. Blossoms drifted on the

air as they need never fall.

Broudiccan tramped after him, grim, solid.

'Do you think this place would resist a Chaos invasion if it came?' Hamilcar asked him, surprised at how the garden's solemnity made him whisper.

'No. If an army can breach the Sea of Bones then Jercho and her sisters will fall.'

They passed onto a bridge over a gurgling stream, causing the wood to creak under the weight of their armour.

'It needn't be an army,' said Hamilcar. 'Mannfred can build an army. I saw it myself in Cartha—'

'—hold!'

Broudiccan caught his shoulder and the column of Astral Templars and Jercho legionaries clattered to a halt.

The space beyond the bridge was littered with small stone benches and statues that had been subjected to centuries of weathering and then shrouded in creepers. The moonlight that filtered through the ornamental trees gleamed where it touched bare stone and cut sharply across reflective pools and small bowls of water. A young man with the entitled impatience of a nobleman rested with one arm against a statue, as though awaiting an audience. He was lightly armoured in a fitted leather lorica with gold accoutrements and a silk cloak swept over one shoulder. A fine pair of steel swords with jewelled hilts were scabbarded at his belt, and rested against the statue beside him was a long spear with a jade-coloured pennant tied around the base of the blade. Seeing Hamilcar at the same time as Hamilcar saw him, he swept up his spear and sauntered towards them.

Broudiccan didn't wait for any sign of malice.

Striding towards the noble he planted his boot heel through the man's chest, strength that had been beaten into him on the God-King's anvil lifting the mortal from his feet and smashing him back against the statue. The youth dropped in a clatter of lorica scales into a reflective pool, broken, Hamilcar would have thought, but then he vaulted agilely to his feet. He hissed, bleeding from his mouth. His spear began to hum as he spun it.

And something that no man should possess glittered in the moonlight.

Fangs.

'By the gods, that's Gilgazed,' el Talame stuttered, agog, pointing with his tulwar, 'el Raniel's eldest son.'

Snake-quick, the vampire struck Broudiccan like a spear thrown at a wall. The Decimator's enormous axe whirled as fast as the vampire's spear could match. Blade struck blade, haft against haft; claps of thunder shook invisible birds from their roosts amongst the trees as storm-fused barbarian battled undying fiend.

Hamilcar turned from his brother's fight, the splash of water warning of the arrival of others from downstream. The vampire's speed made him little more than a blur, a sweeping depression in the surface of the water that raced towards Hamilcar at the foot of the bridge.

The vampire's blade came at him like the lance head of a galloping knight,

hard enough and fast enough in that first dramatic instant of arrival to have speared through dragon scale had Hamilcar not had the wherewithal to duck. It sliced across him. Using his momentum to turn, Hamilcar backhanded the rising butt of his halberd across the vampire's jaw. The knight's face snapped back and spun away. Hamilcar forced the rest of the vampire's body to follow. A boot to the back bent the vampire over the bridge's handrail. Hamilcar lent in, drew his gladius, and rammed the stabbing blade through the vampire's spine. The fiend's legs turned to jelly, and Hamilcar's boot held him where he was. Boot transferred to knee and then he leant in to bite down on the vampire's ear. His teeth tore through cartilage, his mouth filled sluggishly with brackish warm blood, and then he put his full strength through his knee.

The handrail broke with a splintering crack and the howling vampire dropped the short way to the water. Hamilcar spat his bloody ear after him and roared.

He was Hamilcar of the Astral Templars. Eater of Bears. Sigmar would look upon him and then turn to his own two hands to marvel at the titan they had wrought.

The vampire writhed in the shallow water, and the slower men in clanking golden plate that had been hurrying to the bridge from the same direction looked up in surprise. Hamilcar grinned at them. 'Hamilcaaar!' He leapt, two-footed, and flattened the two men into the rocky streambed where the first still scrambled madly to claw his way out. These were not vampires; they were mortal.

They never stood a chance.

'Slaughter the infidels!' cried a voice, cultured, but too steeped in the intonations of the Jerchese to be anything but a native. 'By order of the sun-king!'

With a roar, four-score Solar Guards surged up the paths that converged on the little bridge and its island folly. A boltstorm bolt blasted a knight to scraps of liquid gold and cast the two behind into the trees with the aftershock. Prosecutors took wing. While Hamilcar and Broudiccan had fought, Thracius and el Talame had organised their men and they moved to oppose their attackers now. Armed and ready, Hamilcar would have counted on his dozen alone against five times the number of mortal warriors that assaulted them now, but for every ten heavy knights there was a sneering nobleman with an exotic blade and fangs.

With a hiss of fury, a vampire in oiled green lorica scales broke from his unit of mortals and punched through a line of el Talame's soldiers like a ballista bolt fired from Shyish. Hamilcar yelled for Thracius as men began to cartwheel from the frenzied vampire.

Before the Liberator-Prime could intervene, the bushes behind the vampire burst apart and Crow bore the undying champion to the ground. There was a gargling scream as the gryph-hound's beak tore through the armour of its chest. Hamilcar grunted at the sudden, shared pain in his breast, and splashed for the stream's bank. Inexplicably breathless, he turned to see Broudiccan. The Decimator was now holding his own against three more, warring through the rubble of demolished statuary.

The Stormcast could handle the vampires, Hamilcar had no doubt, but that still left the Solar Guards.

‘Hold them, Thracius!’ he bellowed. He turned to find el Talame, shouting instructions to his own men, beset, on the other side of the bridge. Their rear ranks were ankle-deep in the water. ‘With me, my friend. Bring me to the sun-king.’

‘Take your own,’ the general called back across the water. ‘They will be more use to you.’

‘The Bear-Eaters can hold their own. You cannot. And I would hate to come so far to strike the wrong head from its shoulders.’ His chest was tight. Breathing came hard. ‘Lead me through this nightmare!’

One of Thracius’ Liberators took the slack as el Talame and his soldiers splashed across the water to Hamilcar’s side. The general himself was last, covered by a boltstorm from a kneeling Judicator that drove the Solar Guard from the water’s edge and allowed the Liberator to put down the vampire that had led them. Another with a snarling leopard daubed across his facemask took station on the bridge and grimly stood their ground.

‘This way.’ El Talame swept past Hamilcar. The pace he set was impressive for one so old, but Hamilcar had time enough to look back and see Broudiccan’s thunderaxe obliterate a statue and shred a dozen Solar Guard with shrapnel and still better it. He swatted aside a silver bower that grew across the path.

Unkempt for a court. And Hamilcar had once ruled from a cave.

And just like that he began to laugh.

Mortality had never seemed so distant.

With strength and vigour twenty times a mortal man’s, he forged a path to the front of the company of warriors, and forced his way through a tangle of ornamental dwarf trees to stumble into a clearing.

An elevated platform of eerie silver-grey stone rose above the small trees and tiered gardens. It looked ancient. The moon shone with a caged, furious splendour, shackled to the form of a splintered throne in which sat the sun-king, Joraad el Ranoon.

His golden mask beheld Hamilcar from his high throne.

With a series of shouts intended to bolster each other’s courage, el Talame’s men took the steps. In response the sun-king lifted one sleeve from the shining rest of his throne.

At his gesture a host of men and women, and even children, shuffled, unseeing, from the crackling glare of the throne and moved to block the steps. Some wore blazing suits of armour, similar to the woman that Hamilcar had bested in the gatehouse, although nothing so impressive in this penumbral shadow-realm. Others were in simple habits emblazoned with the unsettling sun. None of them spoke, smiled, or even looked down at the cracked steps as they pressed together between the oncoming soldiers and their king. If there was one amongst them that could appreciate the incongruity of that emblem in this place then it was the self-proclaimed god-king on the throne behind them, but he did not seem to.

The soldiers hesitated a few steps below the vacant Rays.

The Rays themselves looked over the soldiers as if they were blind, and soporific with the experience of their remaining senses.

'You seek to best me with children,' Hamilcar shouted up to the impassive sun-king. 'Know that you face Hamilcar of the Astral Templars. I am a Stormcast Eternal!' Hamilcar hefted his halberd high above his head, his lantern in the other. 'Tell the Lord of Death when you cross the Stygxx Gate that it is the Bear-Eater that sends you, prince of lies. Tell him that you are down payment on the soul of a brother.'

The assembled host opened their mouths, and with one voice alone they spoke.

'The men you have killed thus far have followed me freely. Not by choice perhaps, but they could have chosen death and that is as much a choice as any other. But these,' the enthroned king waved a hand over his thralls. The proximity to his person of genuine peril must have caused his attention to lapse somewhat, for several of the thralls mimicked the gesture. 'These are innocents. You will have to butcher them all to reach me, *Eternal*. I will see to it. Has Sigmar forged you the stomach for it?'

Joraad leaned forward then, and in a hundred distinct voices, male and female, old and young, began to laugh.

With a grunt, Hamilcar tossed up his halberd, reversed the grip, and then hurled it.

Like a javelin it hissed from his extended arm over the heads of the uncaring slaves and through el Ranoon's belly.

There was a snarl of moonlight as the blade tip skewered him to his throne's high back. A cry tore from Joraad's throat. Blood and dark lumpy juices spurted from the hole made by the halberd shaft and turned the king's banyan silks black. The gathered Rays echoed their master's scream, then one-by-one passed into unconscious. The sheer number of them packed onto the steps kept them from falling far.

'They call me the Bear-Eater,' he called up to the pitifully crying sun-king. 'You do not want to test my stomach.'

He frowned then as the increasingly pale king of Jercho slumped forward onto the halberd shaft.

'Light above,' muttered el Talame. 'Is it dead?'

'He is.' Hamilcar was surprised.

Joraad el Ranoon was no vampire. It was true then: anyone could make a mistake.

Perhaps the mind-controlling magicks by which he ruled would have been affected by the transition to unlife. Or perhaps the land of the unsetting sun was simply no place for a vampire king.

'I suspect Mannfred found him more useful as a willing puppet than a slave.'

'So your vampire is still out there?'

Hamilcar laughed aloud at that, despite his disappointment at seeing the betrayer slip through his fingers once again. There was truth in what the old man said.

The vampire was his.

‘There is only so much of Ghur for him to run into. Say one thing for Hamilcar – in the end, he always triumphs.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer is the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned*, along with the novella *Thorgrim*. He has also written The Beast Arises novel *Echoes of the Long War*, and a plethora of short stories set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Legend Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

An extract from *The Hardest Word*.



A mural of the two-headed orruk war-deity, Gorkamork, covers the rock in age-blached chalk. Beneath, the granite is stained with black, yellow and faded pinks, the marks left by a succession of lords of destruction and Chaos. Gorkamork is the largest but not the most recent. Several layers of runes and glyphs adorn the mural, proclaiming the greatness of their lord and his god, but none of them claim this throne room now.

The visiting Lord-Veritant looks up at the painted wall, disapproving. But I like the wall. It is a tapestry of my enemies' defeats, a thousand years old, and there is something about it that reminds me of my mortal home.

When Vikaeus is Lord-Castellant of the Seven Words, she can decorate as she pleases.

'Do not haunt my doorway, Lord-Veritant,' I say. 'I will stand for no ceremony here.'

'The doorway is not yours, you self-aggrandising fool. You guard it for Sigmar. Like a dog.'

With a scrape of her boot and a wind-ruffle of a cerulean cloak, she turns to me. The phrase 'Ice Queen' leaps unbidden into my mind.

I do not immediately disavow it.

Her armour is the white and blue of the Knights Merciless. Her mask is an expression of bitter spite, which I am relieved to see she carries underarm. The Knights Merciless are known for donning war-masks only when in hostile lands, or in the dispensation of Sigmar's judgement. Her long black hair is drawn back from her forehead and worn in a tail. Her skin is like marble, though no artisan of Azyr ever worked on a material so hard.

I beckon impatiently.

Her footsteps clank on bare stone as she walks down the aisle towards my throne. A pair of gryph-hounds with beaks clad in blessed sigmarite, their neck scales picked out with runes of abjuration, snarl at her heels. My own companion, Crow, uncurls from the beastman pelts piled at my feet and barks a warning that echoes between the crumbling arches and columns.

It appears that even our hounds share a mutual dislike.

‘What brings a Lord-Veritant to the House of the Seven Words? Chaos retreats on every front, for Hamilcar Bear-Eater is as decisive as he is vigilant.’

She halts ten strides away and plants the staff bearing her Lantern of Abjuration, the symbol of her office, into the ground with a resounding clang.

‘I have crossed the Chamonic Gate and been admitted to the crucible pools of Molybdenos. I have spoken with the Prophet Argent, and conferred with the oracles of the Sigmarabulum. I have seen a skaven as old as the world, his paws in the secrets of the gods. His tail is a serpent of probing shadows and in my visions I see it winding close about Sigmar’s neck.’

I scratch my bearded chin. It is oft remarked that Sigmar and I share a likeness, and it is true, the resemblance is uncanny.

‘So why come here?’

‘I see a rising vermintide. It begins here. And I have seen you, Hamilcar. You appear in my visions most frequently of late.’ I smile importunately, but she douses it with a frown like ice water. ‘I see you caged in a storm of unholy lightning, screaming as you are broken, piece by piece.’

I lean back, the totems and trophies that bedeck my purple war-plate clinking as I shift position. ‘You are certain it is me? You are certain it is my fortress?’

‘Even if my visions were less clear, *then* yes. Now I am here, I am sure. I can feel the taint of the rat-men under my skin, Lord-Castellant.’

I glance up to the Lantern of Abjuration, a cage of comet ice that encircles the top of her staff.

‘They are here already,’ she continues. ‘Though I know not where, nor how they mean to enter a bastion of Sigmar.’

[Click here to buy *The Hardest Word*.](#)

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