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AGE OF SIGMAR



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MONSTERS

NOAH VAN NGUYEN



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MONSTERS

Noah Van Nguyen

Yndrasta was coming in too fast.

Through gusts of wind and gouts of rain, the Shyishan hill swelled beneath her. She could make out a tor of dusk-grey stone, a baleful realmgate perched atop it. A midnight-black battle line of Stormcast Eternals held back the horrors pouring from the portal's dismal spell-light. Watching them was like watching a dark fist grip wine from a spilt cask. The gibbering tide leaked through the battle line's fingers, running over its hands.

Yndrasta grimaced. The Anvils of the Heldenhammer needed her. They needed her now.

She tucked her wings, tightened her approach, ignoring her speed. Wind buffeted her. Rain pelted her sigmarite warplate like barbarian arrows. Off her flank, the Knight-Venator and his flight of Prosecutors chased to keep up. They were Anvils of the Heldenhammer, too, dark-hearted and sombre. Stormcast like Yndrasta but only half-willing allies, pulled into her hunt by the force of her will, by the terrible gravity of her legend. They did not fear Yndrasta. For Stormcasts never feared.

But they were wary.

Before the realmgate, through slashes of rain, a Lord of Change leered. The capricious greater daemon had never been christened in mortal syllables. The shamans called it only the Anomia, the nameless one. Even the Anvils had been reluctant to face the soul-eater's tricks.

To Yndrasta, it was only prey. She was the slayer.

She dived. Her allies soared behind her and their fusillade picked up. Thrice-blessed arrows and stormcall javelins cracked like lightning into the crag-crowded hilltop, hammering back the daemonic tide. Gabbling Pink Horrors split asunder. Each ruined half morphed into a more diminutive blue daemon, weeping and morose. Then those were obliterated, and then again the things which their deaths spawned.

Ungiving, the Anvils held the hill's brow. They chanted Yndrasta's name, awaiting her arrival. She wondered if they relished the kill as she did. She wondered if it made their hearts pulse and their blood race.

Shyish bulged closer. Behind the Anomia, the baleful realmgate's components floated in eerie patterns. Soon it would activate. Unless Yndrasta killed the Anomia first, the creature would escape.

A bolt of sorcerous flame streamed just past her shoulder, scorching her pinions. An ice-white flash and the crack of thunder told her one of the Prosecutors had not made it. Yndrasta hardly noticed. The kill. There was only the kill.

The Anomia screeched. Its clawed arms began unfolding in concentric shapes. Its vulture-features hardened into scabrous corners, then swirled into a storm of kaleidoscopic light. Rain-soaked plumage and mottled flesh inflated into recursive bubbles. What emerged from the mutative storm was sickening and imponderable. Wings, upon wings. Eyes, upon eyes. Discs of bronze and purposeless flame. The sight was ineffable, profound...

And pathetic. The Anomia was afraid. To protect itself, the daemon had abandoned its physical form. Now it was harmless and invulnerable.

But invulnerability wouldn't stop Yndrasta. She clenched her jaw, sheered left, barely controlling her descent. This gale reeked of malign magic, a cheap and clever defence. She wouldn't get another pass. She wouldn't make it—

She landed, hard. The maddening visage of the Anomia glared down at her from its place on the tor. Yndrasta didn't stop to admire the abomination. Elegant, efficient, she hefted her holy spear, Thengavar, to her shoulder. She transferred the momentum from her reckless landing into a run up, recruiting every muscle in her body into the coming throw. Force passed up the axis of her, from her big toes through her spine to the tips of her fingers. Yndrasta heard the sound of her breath, felt the wind whip it from her lungs; she smelled the Shyishan petrichor in the rain, reeking of death, and

relished its taste on her lips.

From the Stormcast battle line, orders were given to withdraw. The warriors pounded back, step by step, making way, but not for the daemons. They chanted Yndrasta's many epithets, awaited her killing blow.

And Yndrasta's throw was perfect. Thengavar, sister-in-steel to the God-King's own Ghal Maraz, flew. The glistening weapon whistled through the storm, shrinking into the Anomia's swirling mass, penetrating into...

Into its very...

Her eyes hollow, her shoulders heaving, Yndrasta scanned the Anomia's spectral mass. Thengavar had disappeared. It did not return. She had... missed.

Or Thengavar had missed? The concept felt so unreal Yndrasta wasn't even sure how to express it. She drew her runeblade. There would be a time to contemplate the impossibility of what had just happened.

First, the Anomia. She was the slayer.

Yndrasta roared and charged the maddening monstrosity upon the dais. But the ground folded beneath her, and she stumbled. Her wings flapped, but it was like flying through aether. The air was gone, sucked from the hilltop as if by bellows. A spell-trap, Yndrasta realised. Another cheap sorcerer's trick. But it had its effect, and Yndrasta tumbled into the earthen maw which opened beneath her. She plummeted.

Somewhere far above her, a sick thing laughed.

When the air finally returned, it was useless. Yndrasta barely slowed her descent with a well-timed pulse of her wings. She crashed hard into a pool. Metal clanged on stone. Water doused her. She felt ill, unable to breathe, and ripped the sigmarite bevor from her warplate. She let it dangle, gasped. The air was cool, crisp. She was alive. *Alive...*

And nowhere near her quarry.

Yndrasta shouted until she went hoarse. She punched the water's surface, soaking herself again. She had been so close. Right there, on the verge!

Water dripping from her drenched features, Yndrasta huffed and quieted, finding some pale source of calmness within her. It was a wretched, futile thing. She felt humiliated. Like a hole had been bored through the core of her and she could not cover it up. She ran her mind over those sanity-curdling moments. The Anomia, that monstrosity of flame and wings and geometrically unsound shapes. The universe folding upon itself within the

baleful realmgate. Thengavar disappearing, as if it had never even been thrown.

She shook her head. The recollections made her feel as if her soul had begun to run. Now she was compromised, half warped...

That feeling would fade. So would the humiliation. But Thengavar... Yndrasta batted at the water again. The shaman court had promised Thengavar could pierce the Anomia's wards. Either they were lying or they had been fooled. The fault was not hers. Yndrasta was not perfect, not by any stretch, but she had thrown her spear true. Thengavar did not miss.

A black mirror of knee-deep water pooled around her. The mere rippled with Yndrasta's silvered reflection. She glared at the misshapen image of herself, wondering about what she saw. A long blade of silver hair, shaved temples. Her face, snow-pale, high-cheeked. A pair of ugly scars crossing one eye from brow to jawline.

She had been broken. So many times.

So what? This was far from over. Failure changed nothing. Yndrasta had come to Shyish to slay the Anomia, and she would not leave until that was done. The kill vitalised her. It was all she lived for.

Her eyes wandered. She was in some kind of miraculous grotto beneath the ground, untouched by war despite the carnage above. The clamour of the battle on the hill echoed here, far below. She must return, lest the Anvils sell their lives for nothing. The Shyishan Stormhost made for a gloomy lot, and Yndrasta wouldn't give them more reason to pine over their dark fates and Reforged souls, or to spread more rumours of her heartlessness among the Stormcast. She was cruel, yes. But not needlessly so.

Yndrasta flexed her wings, preparing to leave, but something stayed her. A feeling. She glanced around. A tree loomed over the water. An ancient willow, its fronds stroking the surface of the void-black pool. Dead light gleamed beyond its whips of foliage, illuminating strange pixies in the grotto's air.

Yndrasta wrinkled her nose. This place smelled... unusual. Of death. And life everlasting, like the sterile corridors of Sigmaron's Soul Mills. And roasted meat.

'Sigmar?' spoke a stranger, his voice gravelly from disuse.

Yndrasta turned, her armour creaking with her gentle movement. Beneath the wizened willow, a hulking man-thing hunkered over a guttering flame.

He was a big boar of a mortal, like an ogor-son, all muscle and just enough fat to provide protection from a good blade. Beside him, a strutted-up pot straddled a small fire like a Khainite cauldron in miniature.

The mortal stepped from the darkness, glaring. A tuft of braided hair dangled from his pate to his chest, black as the day the realms would die. A thick moustache weighed down his mouth, each end hanging almost to his hips, like reins on a dracoth's bit. And his skin: it was hardened and black like coal, like the charred flesh of the vermin he roasted on a bent spit beside his pot. The rocky char had worn away in some places. In the palms of his hands, the folds of his joints. Those crannies shone like burnished bronze. But what held Yndrasta's attention were his eyes. Smouldering red gems, enchanted with formidable magic.

Yndrasta tensed. Something deep within her, something immutable and untouched by her Reforgings, detected a threat. This mortal was dangerous.

He leaned in. His cliff-wide brow smoothed. 'You're not Sigmar.'

'I am Yndrasta.' Her voice was husky, overused. 'I am Sigmar's huntress and slayer. Who are you?'

The mortal's ruby-eyes lifted. He glanced to the fleshy trunk of the great willow. There, propped up against the tree, a double-headed battle-axe resplendent with power. Yndrasta could feel the pulse of its war-heart beating in her breast. She could taste its marvellous heat on the air. That was a weapon of Azyr if ever she had seen one.

The mortal's eyes returned to her.

Yndrasta raised her finger. 'Don't.'

The man-thing tumbled towards the axe like an avalanche.

Yndrasta ripped her wings through the air. She lurched up, sailing through the willow fronds, and landed gracefully between the stranger and his weapon.

He staggered to a halt. Yndrasta's drawn sword prodded into his neck, just beneath those dracoth reins. The blade's tip rasped against his coal-black skin. Beside them, the battle-axe's presence felt like a great weight. Lift it, and the world might keel over on its side, and they'd both slide off to the bottom of the universe.

'Why would Sigmar come here?' Yndrasta said.

The mortal's eyes shimmered. He had a desperate look to him. His hands seemed tense, ready to shield himself, or gouge out her eyes. Whichever he

felt might save his life, Yndrasta thought.

‘You’re a stranger,’ he said, uneasy. ‘You burst into my home, armed and mantled like you came to slay godbeasts. But it’s only me here. And I’d say that warrants me reaching for my woodsplitter.’

Woodsplitter. The weapon radiated the heat of dead suns.

This man – and he was a man, Yndrasta could smell his humanity like a prey-thing’s spoor – was old. He stood with a wizard’s stoop. An antiquated rhotic trill pattered from his tongue like a drumroll, harkening to ages Yndrasta had never known. And his burnt hide. And that bronze, like an encasement beneath the coal scars. And that axe – *worldsplitter* might be the better word...

Yndrasta had spent months hunting the Anomia. She knew well the legends which surrounded it.

‘You’re Voyi,’ she said.

The man’s scoff was like a volcanic eruption. ‘No. I’m tired. Go back where you came from. Leave me alone.’

Yndrasta lifted her chin. ‘When Sigmar’s pantheon still ruled from Highheim, the gods had champions. Mortals, who fought in their names. Sigmar chose some fated few to lead them, as he would later choose us Stormcast. They received his blessings. From Grungni the Maker, and the God-King himself. Eyes wrought from earthfire. Or enchanted flesh, to resist the Dark Powers’ corroding touch.’

‘I don’t like this story,’ the man interrupted.

Yndrasta gave a dry laugh, but her lips were flat and her eyes were stony. ‘No. I shouldn’t think you would, Voyi.’

The pits in his eyes flared. Then his face smoothed. He said nothing, as if silence could make the revelation go away.

Yndrasta spared an unkind smile. ‘Voyi. The Unblessed, the Traitor, whom Sigmar entrusted with the defence of Sigmaron in his hour of need, and who betrayed him. You *are* Voyi. You are the Unremembered One.’

Voyi stared. ‘Not as unremembered as I’d like.’

‘I know you,’ Yndrasta said. ‘From the first sagas. I’m one of the few.’

Voyi froze. ‘Then you’re in his confidence.’

‘Yes.’

His lips pursed. ‘Then you know what I know.’

Yndrasta nodded. ‘He is not a forgiving god. He knows spite. He knows

malice.'

'And he does not forget old slights, it seems. Even after an age.' Voyi's eyes lowered to Yndrasta's sword. 'Get on with it.'

Yndrasta shook her head. 'You defeated the Anomia in the Age of Myth. Tell me how. I'll pray mercy for you, when I tell the God-King you live.'

Doubt clouded the heat in Voyi's eyes. 'The Anomia? Am I not a fair prize?'

'I hunt monsters, not traitors,' Yndrasta said. 'The Anomia is my chosen quarry. You are nothing.'

Voyi *hmp*hed. 'I'd wondered what the ruckus was. You're one of those he replaced us with. Stormcast Eternals. Didn't think I'd be so fortunate as to meet one.'

Yndrasta canted her head. 'You have a bizarre view of fortune.'

'Maybe.' Voyi chuckled. 'But there is poetry to you, eh? Monsters, hunting monsters.'

Yndrasta's features went hard as ice. 'I am no monster.'

'Yes. You are. You're the monsters he replaced us with. Loyal little thunder golems, clad in metal which is named after him.' Voyi's nostrils flared. 'The Great Enemy has daemons. Now so does he. Even picks you from among the dead. Or sometimes he saves you the trouble of dying, plucks you when you're ripe as roses.' He spat. 'That's all we are to him. Raw material.'

Yndrasta's eye twitched. It was easy to imagine betraying Voyi's survival to Sigmar. She began to think she looked forward to it. Maybe she'd even be the one sent for him. And why not? He was human, yes. But he was irksome and a renegade, and even humans could be monsters.

Voyi had power in him yet. Yndrasta could sense it, a lingering soul-link between him and that axe, warm and tensed, like his mountainous hands. She imagined how a duel between them might look. Voyi's earth-shaking blows, moments behind her lightning-fast strikes. His enchanted blood spraying her armour like baptismal waters. His charred head dangling from her warplate by that barbaric braid...

And finally, Sigmar's merciless satisfaction as she laid his skull at the base of his throne.

She could do it now. She had that prerogative.

'Tell me how you defeated it and I shall be kind,' Yndrasta said. 'My spear

disappeared in its aura. How did you do it? Did you use that axe?’

‘No.’

Yndrasta raised a brow. ‘You were unarmed?’ The shaman court had mentioned such a requirement, but they had spoken in riddles she thought she hadn’t fully understood.

‘I mean I won’t help you,’ Voyi said.

Yndrasta straightened. ‘Why? To protect that creature?’

Voyi nodded. ‘You get what you want, you’ll just go and tell Sigmar where I am. There’ll be no more hiding from him. And the Anomia gave me this sanctuary, gave me its word it would protect me.’

‘That turned out as well as one might have expected,’ Yndrasta said.

Voyi’s features hardened. ‘The daemon’s better to its word than Sigmar ever was.’

Yndrasta’s lips curled. Those words pierced.

‘Sigmar stands alone,’ she said. ‘So yes, his wardenship over mankind requires difficult decisions. No one expects a heathen renegade hiding in a pocket of the world to understand that. If Sigmar betrayed your trust, he must have seen you for what you were, from the very beginning. I do.’

‘Don’t pretend you know a thing about me,’ Voyi said. ‘Sigmar’s a bastard and always was. I’ll not help you. Not if it’s the last thing I do.’ He folded his arms. ‘Or... don’t do. You understand.’

For the span of a held breath, Yndrasta maintained her vacant expression. Then she bent with anger and roared. Her armour rattled on her shoulders. Her blade quivered at Voyi’s neck. This close, on the verge, and he dared defy her?

‘If you won’t help’ – Yndrasta snarled, refreshing her blade grip – ‘maybe I’ll just kill you now. I think Sigmar might like that.’

Voyi’s bold mask cracked, fear flashing across his face. He stumbled, and Yndrasta’s blade followed him. He stuttered in search of words.

‘I’m not afraid of dying,’ he managed, firmly enough that Yndrasta thought maybe he really wasn’t. ‘Look around you. This is the afterlife of my people. The Black Pond, under the Judgement Willow. They came here, my fathers and sons, as ghosts. I died when they died. When Sigmar let them die. And when their laughter bled from these caves and their memory went to dust in the corners, I was as gone as they were. So kill me if you want. It’s what you’re made for. And you can’t possibly take any more from

me than Sigmar did.’

Yndrasta scoffed. ‘I thought you a heathen traitor. You’re only a spoilt brat. Whining about your due, after everything the God-King gave you. Everything you threw in his face.’

Voyi’s scowl went slack. ‘Everything? You mean everything he didn’t do? Or everything he kept safe and sound in Azyr, all these ages? Pretty and eternal, just like you, even as my people went extinct! He did nothing for us. Maybe you mean everything he did for that Hag Queen, Morathi, even knowing what she was. Oh, yes. I’ve heard the rumours of your city, Anvilgard. The gheists made from its fall told me, passing through these cave walls in flight from Nagash. Sigmar’s own city, put to Khainite slaughter by Morathi’s hands. And after all he did for them.

‘Yet you speak of *everything*. Perhaps you mean everything in Sigmaron, that gleaming city with all those staring statues of him. Tell me – are the lightning bolts still everywhere? They are. Oh, I see it in your eyes, they are. Made from Ghurish marble and Hyshian gems and precious Aqshy metals. You thought it all came from Azyr? Did you even care to ask? I doubt it. Because you fight his wars – and don’t tell me you don’t, I know you do, you’re a *Stormcast Eternal!* – but you never notice! You bring the wars with you, and if they aren’t there when you come, they always are when you leave.

‘And as those starving mortals you claim to protect finally *die* for you, Sigmar’s at least good enough to take their souls! He melts them down, recasts them in the shape of himself, just like he does with their treasures! Not subtle. But he never has been! He’s a god, and you’re his monsters! You didn’t know, because how could you? You’re too busy preening your angel feathers and polishing your shining armour and prattling of glory! You’re too busy barging into old men’s homes and waving your sacred swords in their faces! You won’t even let me eat my supper! You’re so fearsome and noble I must go hungry to witness you!’

Voyi’s food was burning. The pot overboiled; the flame guttered and spat.

Yndrasta cast her gaze across the cavern. She finally saw it for what it was. A cheap refuge, built with odds and ends for a broken man with nowhere to go and no one to love him. Voyi put on a bold face and clad his indignation in sophistry, but he stood with shaking legs and a crooked back. And when Yndrasta had been angry – when she had been *angry* – fear ran

through him like a current of lightning. She threatened a harmless man.

Yndrasta sheathed her blade. She had fantasised about setting Voyi's head at Sigmar's feet. He dreamed of eating roasted vermin and slurping soup boiled with the water of his extinct tribe's afterlife.

'Go and eat your food,' she said.

Voyi tromped back to his campfire, grumbling, not once looking back.

Yndrasta walked a long circle around him. Even if he wasn't pathetic, she couldn't kill him. Not yet. She must learn the Anomia's weakness. But Voyi wasn't going to help, and time was running out. The distant clamour above continued – the battle had not abated – but the Anomia's baleful realmgate could activate at any moment. Then it would be too late. Yndrasta would be left with nothing to return to her trophy halls but stinging shame and the memory of Thengavar's loss. The Anvils of the Heldenhammer would spread rumour of her failure.

And Sigmar...

He had never been a forgiving god, Yndrasta thought. She had always admired him for that. And when she killed, it was for him as much as herself. But he would not forget her failure.

Yndrasta watched Voyi settle himself to eat. She could do this. She could convince him to help her. What was it but a different kind of hunt?

'My spear,' she said. 'Thengavar. It was Sigmar's gift to me. The Anomia stole it.'

Voyi looked at her askance. 'If you tried to kill it with it, that's no wonder.'

'You fought the Anomia. You know exactly what it is. A monster. The daemon feeds on mortals' souls.'

Voyi ladled a miserable portion of mushroom-studded broth into his bowl. 'What difference is there between that and what Sigmar does? Or the Great Necromancer? Or the Twins, or the bloody Hag Queen, or any of them? They all eat souls, even if some are pickier than others. And you Stormcasts didn't make it out alive, either. Sigmar ate your souls. Look at you. You even talk like him.'

Yndrasta didn't know where to begin. 'I am exactly where I want to be, Voyi. Were you so different?'

He paused. 'No. Perhaps not. But maybe that's the problem. And I didn't stay.' He pulled meat from the carcass on the spit. 'Here.'

The corners of Yndrasta's nose rose. No part of her wanted to answer that

invitation, but she was a slayer, not a savage. 'I am not your guest.'

Voyi shrugged, gnawing on the stringy meat. 'You kill things, huntress. I smell death on you, and it's not this realm. If the fact some of those things you butcher are daemons is supposed to be proof you're good, that's a low mark to set.' He swallowed. 'Even if you are special. A monster slayer, you say.'

'Not a monster, if that is your meaning.'

'Take away the lightning and the bloody armour and I wouldn't even see the difference. All you do is kill. You're like the damned Bloodbound. *Slayer*. Ha! I bet you even take heads.'

Yndrasta glared. 'That is different.'

Voyi grimaced. 'Course it is. It's always different.'

She steeled her eyes. If Voyi thought the Stormcast were monsters, he hadn't seen monsters.

'Kragnos,' she whispered.

Voyi fell still. 'You utter powerful names in dark places. Say his name and he shall appear.'

'You wanted monsters,' Yndrasta said. 'I told you – I hunt monsters. The Anomia is a minor errand. My true quarry is Kragnos, the End of Empires.' Her fists closed, her gauntlets hissing against themselves. 'I will destroy Kragnos. I yearn for it, more than anything in all the realms. Is that the desire of a monster?'

Voyi darkened. 'I told you. Monsters, hunting monsters.' He sighed and continued eating. 'If you're after Kragnos, Sigmar sent you to do what he could not. And you're a fool for listening.'

'I choose my quarry,' Yndrasta said. 'I am not Sigmar's hound. I do not fetch. He does not send me.'

Voyi shook his head. 'Yes. He does. Just by letting you go, he does. You think I don't know? I remember what it was like. Without his approval, we're nothing. And it's true. Look what happened to me.'

'You did this to yourself,' Yndrasta said. 'If you ever truly knew him, then you would know his decisions are not without reason. His choices are necessary.'

'His choices are heartless.'

'Yes.' Yndrasta's jaw was iron. 'When they have to be. When needs must. Our wars are different than yours were. To save one life, sometimes a

thousand must perish. Sometimes that is the best that can be done.’

Voyi tossed the remnants of his bowl into a patch of moss. He stared. After a long breath, he nodded. ‘Maybe.’ He rose and pushed through the fronds, towards his axe. ‘But have you ever th—’

Yndrasta moved. A gust kicked up, and her sigmarite-shod boots padded to the earth.

She was between Voyi and his axe again, her blade back at his neck.

Voyi lowered his bowl to a pile of miserable effects. ‘Easy. Tidying. No more.’

Yndrasta scanned him. She sheathed her blade. ‘You’re wrong about him. Maybe that’s why you were fool enough to betray him.’

‘I didn’t betray him,’ Voyi said. He took Yndrasta in, head to toes, contemplating her. ‘I’ve never sensed power like yours, nor purpose. Not in all my time in the heavens. Not in all my time in the earth.’

Finally they were getting somewhere. ‘Power alone will not defeat the Anomia,’ Yndrasta said. ‘How, Voyi? How did you bind it?’

Voyi considered. ‘Not with power. I only have shreds left of what Sigmar gave me, hardly enough to use it willy-nilly. But I could beat the Anomia again. If I had to.’ His forehead crinkled and crunched. ‘It’s a secret. But once you know, it’s easy.’

‘Tell me,’ Yndrasta said. ‘In return I can help you. I do not know what my pleas are worth to him, but I will beg his mercy.’

Voyi whiffled. ‘And you said you knew him. Tell me, huntress – what mercy is a traitor due?’

Yndrasta’s features grew frosty.

‘I’ve a better idea,’ Voyi said. ‘Keep this place and my survival a secret, and I’ll help.’ He extended his hand. ‘Whatever is spoken of me, I’m a man of my word. What are you?’

Yndrasta glared at his burnt fingers. What was the worth of a traitor’s word? And would she be any better than him, to conceal his survival from Sigmar? Sigmar still craved vengeance against Voyi. He did not speak of him, and he had struck his name from the chronicles, but he had not forgotten.

Few knew the God-King’s will as well as Yndrasta. Few knew the cruelty of it.

‘I cannot lie to the God-King,’ Yndrasta said. ‘Not for you.’

Voyi shuddered, as if the burns on his enchanted skin were still fresh, the pain still real. He withdrew his hand.

‘Want to know what I did?’ he asked. ‘I hit him. Sigmar told me he would not save my people, and I hit him. He would not even look me in the eyes as he said it. I hit him in the back of his fat, divine head.’ He raised his balled fist, showing it to Yndrasta. “‘We must reinforce our allies in Ulgu,” Sigmar told me. Bloody-handed Morathi and that black-heart Malerion! Can you believe it? Look what he got for it!’ Voyi huffed. ‘I struck Sigmar, little as it meant. Then I stole what I thought would save my people and I left.’ His eyes flitted to the great axe. ‘It wasn’t enough. Maybe I am a spoilt brat, huntress. Maybe I wanted too much. Not everyone gets what they deserve. But I hope Sigmar does. And I hope you do, too.’

Yndrasta averted her eyes. ‘I did not come for this.’

‘No. You came for the Anomia. You won’t let me forget it.’ He spat. ‘At best, you’re a fool. At worst, you’re more terrible than the things you hunt. Given all this power, and look what you do with it. Bully feeble men in their hiding places. To protect your paltry ego, and your fat god’s vainglory. I won’t help you. All you’ll do is come for me next.’

A screech resounded through the cave from above, distorted by distance and Shyishan geology. The Anomia.

Frustrated, Yndrasta exhaled. There was no more time. ‘Voyi—’

A threshing sound drew closer, like a chain hewing through air.

The axe.

Yndrasta dived. The glimmering battle-axe carved through the space where she had just stood. The blazing weapon hurtled into the darkness, then back, severing willow fronds before clanging into Voyi’s metal hand.

‘I’ll not go back,’ he growled. ‘I’ll not face a hypocrite’s justice, and I’ll not let you deliver it!’

He hurled the axe again. This time Yndrasta had no time to dodge. The weapon smashed into her, exploding against her armour with a volcano’s heat.

She flew back. Voyi swept into the wake of his blow. Yndrasta recovered, but fighting him off was like holding back an eruption. Each of his strikes was sheer elemental force, the kind of energy which shattered realms. Pitying him had been a mistake.

Voyi redoubled his efforts, but now Yndrasta was prepared. She found her

footing, adjusted her weight. He struck. She dodged. His mighty blows rushed through empty air. Soon his strength flagged. Voyi was old, drained. He could only continue for so much longer. Breathing hard, he withdrew and cocked his shoulder, telegraphing another throw.

Yndrasta's eyes shot to his worldsplitter, so much like Thengavar. Charged with the same energy. Possessed of the same force.

Gritting his teeth, Voyi threw his axe.

Yndrasta, unblinking, caught it.

The look on Voyi's face said much. Yndrasta bowled him to the ground and roared, her spittle stringing across his face. Voyi's pot toppled, dousing the glowing cinders of his fire. Ash plumed where he fell.

Yndrasta raised the axe, her blood boiling over. Pent force travelled up the axis of her body, from her toes to her fingertips, to be unleashed through the weapon's merciless edge. A perfect swing, for a perfect strike, for a *perfect kill*—

Then Voyi howled, arching his back. He flailed beneath Yndrasta's weight, struggling to brush the burning coals out from beneath his spine.

Yndrasta watched with hollow eyes. Recollections of the woman she once was resolved out of the mists of her memory. She remembered taking to the air with her tribe, on the backs of their galloping pegasi. She remembered their great hunts, driving prey towards each other between the mountains of their people. Even then the kill was effortless. Satisfying. Then the realm came apart, in fire and blood, and a daemontide washed against the foothills of those mountains like a deluge. To battle back the daemons and their pagan hordes, Yndrasta united her tribesmen with their old adversaries. Nobody else helped them. Nobody.

Yndrasta blinked. That mortal woman died doing the only thing she knew how: driving her spear into the flank of a daemon king whose shadow darkened horizons. She still remembered howling as she did it, howling as the titanic daemon split her in twain. Not from pain, but *satisfaction*.

It had been so long, but Yndrasta had not changed. Not at all. She enjoyed what she had become. She enjoyed the eternal hunt far more than she had ever loved anything before, even her own people. It was complicated. It was never simple. But whatever Yndrasta had become, she was not this. A senseless killer, enslaved to violence.

She looked at Voyi again and saw him for what he was: a suffering old

man, nothing like her.

Betrayer, or betrayed. Did it even matter? Yndrasta could kill him. Tie his head to her belt, and return to Sigmar with something – anything – to make up for the Anomia. She wouldn't even regret it.

She hurled Voyi's worldsplitter. The weapon thudded into the Judgement Willow, quivering in its trunk. Then Yndrasta waded into the dark waters of the Black Pond, preparing to leave.

Voyi scrambled off the coals of his fire, panting. 'Where are you going?'

Yndrasta's eyes bristled. 'To kill the Anomia.'

'You don't know how.'

'*Then I shall learn how!*' Yndrasta snapped. 'Not all of us have given up on the world, Voyi. Not all of us have given up on ourselves. I don't know what Sigmar did to you, or if the sagas are true. But I know you are broken and I am not. I am a slayer. A monster, too. Fine. But I choose this path. I choose to slay Kragnos and the Anomia and to let you live. And if you think for a moment my choices make me as bad as the things I kill, you are either jaded or a senile fool. And you are wrong, Voyi. So wrong.'

Yndrasta beat her wings, flinging off moisture which had dewed on her pinions. She poised to take flight.

Voyi's face twisted. 'You already defeated it.'

Yndrasta paused, glaring. 'Don't.'

'The Anomia cannot be slain. But it can be frightened, and in that state, bound. If the daemon has revealed its true form, it is vulnerable. You need only walk up and pluck something from it. Sigmar's strength shall protect you.' He chuckled bitterly. 'Take its head, huntress. Your weapon shall be returned, and the Anomia will not take form again.'

Yndrasta's face wrenched up. She could not wrap her mind around it. 'I don't understand.'

'No. It is a paradox. A contradiction, as it is meant to be. Only daemons and fools understand it. We need only accept it.'

Yndrasta's gaze softened. 'Why, Voyi?'

Voyi groaned. He sounded exactly as tired and old as he must be. 'I did not betray Sigmar. I loved him. I loved everything he ever did. But when he told me no...' His voice cracked.

Again, Yndrasta's eyes bristled with some foreign feeling. To look at Voyi felt like looking at something within herself, something naked and ugly and

weak.

Voyi's jaw set. 'Perhaps monsters are what we need. Or, if not monsters... then whatever you are. You're better than I was, Yndrasta. And when you dispatch the Anomia, I beg you, return and destroy me yourself. I'll not face him again.'

Yndrasta glanced up, into the leering darkness. Battle called her. When it was done, finding her way back here would be easy. So would ending Voyi's life. It might even be a mercy, in some perverse sense of the word. But a nagging feeling crept in the base of her legs, up her back, into her cold, cracked heart. A kind of irresolute doubt, pulling at the very substance of her. Pity. Or maybe some kinder version of that sentiment.

Yndrasta had never lied to Sigmar before. The God-King trusted her.

Maybe that would make doing it this once easier.

'Rest, Voyi,' Yndrasta said. 'There are no monsters here.'

She beat her wings, hurtling into the darkness in search of nightmares to slay.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noah Van Nguyen is a freelance writer who lives in the U.S. with his wife. His tales set in the Mortal Realms include the novels *Godeater's Son* and *Yndrasta: The Celestial Spear* and the novella *Nadir* from the Warhammer Underworlds anthology *Harrowdeep*. He has also written several stories set in the grim darkness of the 41st millennium, including 'The Last Crucible', and the Warhammer Crime stories 'No Third Chance' and 'Carrion Call'. When he's not writing, Noah enjoys studying foreign languages and exploring far-off lands.

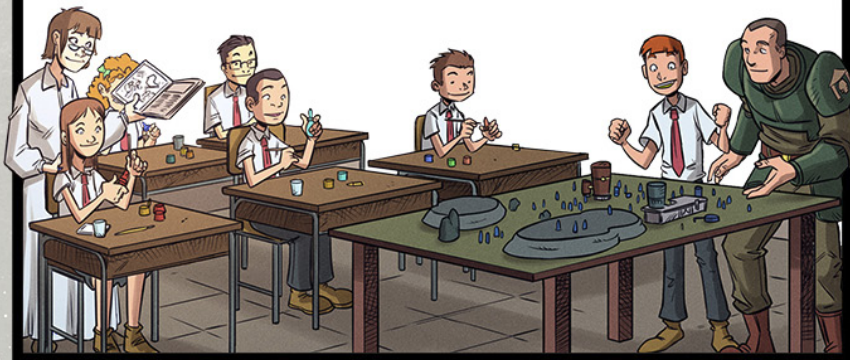


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