



WARHAMMER®
THE END TIMES

BRIDE OF
KHAINÉ

GRAEME LYON

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Graeme Lyon

Season of Blood, Year 223 of the Age of Vengeance

I am the broken queen of a broken city.

I sit in my iron throne, in the drab stone chamber at the pinnacle of my tower, and I gaze down through cloudy eyes at the fire and death in the streets below.

'How dare they?' I whisper through cracked and broken lips, not for the first time. The nerve of the humans, coming into my city and killing my people. Every druchii in Har Ganeth is mine to kill, in Khaine's name, not theirs.

I should be down there amongst them, killing the barbarian worshippers of the so-called Blood God and any of my people foolish enough to get between me and them. But I am trapped here. Tonight is Death Night, Khaine's night, when all across Naggaroth my daughters revel in the worship of the Bloody Handed One, falling upon the unwary and sating their appetites for murder and bloodletting. It is the night upon which I regain my youth and vigour.

For months now, I have been frail, my skin like parchment and my bones brittle. I am swathed in furs, like many of the savage northmen below, to stave off the cold that chills me to my core. My hair is dry and greying, my vision clouded, my joints arthritic. That is why I am not down there killing. But in just a few hours, the moons will rise and I will bathe in the Cauldron of Blood. I will be strong again, and I will seek revenge upon all that stand in my way.

I focus on the scrying mirror before me, trying to ignore the hideous reflection that lurks behind the images of carnage. The scene shifts, following my thoughts and seeking a single figure. Seeking my champion.

'My champion...'

The words were as a whisper on the breeze, but they burned through Tullaris Dreadbringer's mind with the force of a hurricane. He swung the First Draich, carving through the tattooed torso of a northern savage, and murmured a prayer in reply to the deity who spoke to him. Khaine's words proved that the god was pleased with the night's bloodletting – as he had been every day of these past few weeks. Since the Bloodied Horde had fallen upon Har Ganeth, many souls had had been given unto the God of Murder's embrace.

Tullaris turned, driving his draich into the throat of a heavily armoured human warrior and tearing it out with a spray of blood. As the daemon-worshipper fell, a pair of goat-headed beastmen, grotesquely furred and clutching crude, broad-bladed axes, took his place. One leapt at the Herald of Khaine, its axe held high. With a quick chop, Tullaris broke the wooden haft of the axe and sliced through the beastman's wrists with the return stroke. The creature fell back, bleating in agony, while its fellow struck from behind the Executioner, aiming a blow at his neck.

Tullaris ducked beneath the clumsy attack and lashed out, but the creature evaded the attack, moving faster than the Executioner would have deemed possible for such a hulking brute.

'Impressive, for a savage beast,' he breathed, swinging out an armoured elbow and catching the Chaos-tainted creature in its throat, crushing its windpipe. It dropped its axe and clutched at its ruined neck. Tullaris turned slowly, driving the point of his draich into the blood-soaked ground and pulling his dagger from its sheath on his belt. As the beastman choked and gasped,

the Executioner carved the rune of Khaine into its chest, each stroke slow and precise. It looked up at him, and he marvelled that such barely sentient creatures could be a threat to the lands of men. The weak lesser races were truly pathetic.

‘You wonder why I do this, beast,’ he said. He knew it would be unable to understand him, but standards had to be maintained. ‘Were you an elf, I would use the First Draich to do this. But you are not worthy of that blade, the first to be blessed by Khaine himself when my order was founded.’

Finishing the last stroke, he watched the beastman’s blood well up in the shape of the sacred sigil. He wiped his dagger on the creature’s filthy fur, replaced it in its sheath, and bent close to the asphyxiating warrior.

‘No, you are not worthy, scum, but it amuses me to deny your soul, such as it is, to your dark masters. By this mark are you branded as Khaine’s. And when you die, you will belong to him, not to whatever Ruinous Power that drives you. Understand what an honour has been given to you, and how little you deserve it.’

The beastman clawed frantically at Tullaris’s breastplate. He let it. There was nothing it could do to him. He watched it until the light went out of its eyes.

‘Lord Khaine,’ he whispered, ‘I send you this meagre offering, the first of many, on your night, Death Night. Let this be a sign of the compact between us, and lend your strength to me. Let the murders I commit this night be in your name and for your glory.’

Of course Tullaris is at the heart of the fighting. I would be proud, were it a sort of emotional attachment and not a weakness. I am closer to him than I am to any other living being, but I feel nothing for him. He is useful, a weapon, and nothing more. And yet... It is only at times like this, when I am at my most vulnerable, that I might allow myself to admit that I need him. He is the only druchii I come close to trusting to truly protect me. I know that he is as devoted to Khaine. He hears our lord’s voice, acts with his intent. I wish that I could say the same. I act only for myself, when it comes to it. What I do brings glory to the Bloody Handed One, because murder is his sacrament, but I do it because I enjoy it. Cutting into flesh, hearing the agony in a voice, watching life depart from a mortal shell: these are all that truly bring me pleasure. Death is my life, and the same is true of Tullaris.

Tullaris stood, pulled the First Draich from the ground and looked around for his next target. Around him, humans and beastmen rampaged through the streets, lit by flickering fires and met by knots of druchii.

What had begun as a full-scale battle had quickly broken up into innumerable skirmishes, with warbands of marauders and half-men going to ground amongst the rubble and flames. The witch elves of the Khainite cult had proven their worth a thousand times over in the weeks since, the self-sufficiency and savage bloodlust of their creed making such small-scale encounters the natural habitat of the warrior-maidens.

Tullaris’s own Executioners were no less adept at murder, but had found it a challenge to adapt to this method of war. If any druchii could be truly comfortable with others at their shoulders, it was an Executioner. Over millennia, Tullaris had forged them into a unit, drilled to fight in ranks and rely on the deadly skill of their brethren as much as their own. It had taken them time to become used to the guerrilla war that the situation required.

The Herald himself had been the exception. He was ever alone, never willing to trust any other – his exalted position in the cult would not allow it. He didn’t even fully trust *her*.

Hellebron. He had served her for as long as he could remember, ever since that first Death Night, when Khaine had first spoken to him and he had taken his first life. She had been his life, his mistress, his lover, his queen. It galled him that now, when she was most needed, when her

city was aflame and beset by foes, she was not on the streets, not shedding blood in Khaine's name. He looked up at the peak of her tower, the tallest point in the city, visible from anywhere to emphasise that every elf in Har Ganeth was within her gaze, and her grasp. Was she watching him, Tullaris wondered? Was she revelling in the glory he brought to the cult and the god?

He is eternally young and strong, my champion. It is further proof, if any were needed, of his connection to our lord. Khaine's might flows through his veins. I know. I have tasted it. When I am freshly bathed in the Cauldron of Blood and I am strong, we are a formidable pair. None can stand before us, and I revel in the carnage we wreak. But when I am as I am now, I sometimes see something in his eyes, something I do not understand. I have studied it, and I think it is pity. That is an alien emotion to me, but I know he feels it. A weakness, for I could exploit it, had I a mind to. That is why I refuse to feel anything for him.

Tullaris stalked around a corner into a broad, rubble-lined avenue. Khaine's whispered guidance had led him here through streets lined by tall houses, their doors broken open, brutalised corpses lying where elves had fallen defending their homes. Tullaris had no sympathy. They were weak. The city was stronger without them.

In the street before him, corpses had been piled up and were aflame, the great pyres casting flickering light over a circle of heavily armoured humans who surrounded a massive figure. The figure stood head and shoulders above any of them, his crimson and gold armour glittering in the glow of the fires. He held a helmet in one hand, skull-faced and adorned with a crest that mimicked the angular rune of his god. His face, savage and bruised, also bore the sigil, in what looked like dried blood. Clearly, this was some mighty northern champion. Tullaris smiled beneath his own skull-faced helmet. The Murder God had led him to a great sacrifice indeed.

'In Khaine's name, face me, daemon-fondler,' he shouted. The champion turned, and a grin split his battered and bloodied face. He motioned his warriors aside and, throwing off his helm, lifted a great double-bladed axe from the ground beside him. He strode forward, shouting in his barbaric tongue. The runes on the axe blades writhed in the firelight, as if in anticipation of the battle to come.

'I don't understand you, scum,' said Tullaris, 'but I'll take that as a yes.'

The Chaos champion roared and sprang forward, axe raised. Tullaris stood his ground, the First Draich gripped lightly in one hand. As the axe came down, he stepped calmly to the side and swung his weapon in a lazy arc. It sliced into the blood-hued armour of the champion. It was like cutting into flesh, and it sucked at the weapon. Tullaris tried to pull it out, but it was stuck fast.

The champion barked out a laugh and pulled himself backwards, toppling Tullaris to the muddy ground. The elf rolled as the axe came down again, and kicked out. His foot impacted on an armoured shin and pain ran up his leg.

'Asuryan's oath,' he swore and scrambled to his feet. He ducked beneath a wild swipe, grabbed the haft of his draich and heaved. It stayed where it was. He threw himself away from the champion again as the great axe swung at his neck. Desperately, the Herald of Khaine looked around for a weapon. The only ones he could see were in the grip of the eight Chaos warriors who had now surrounded the two combatants. For now, they seemed happy to watch, but if he made a grab for one of their axes or swords, they would no doubt join the fight and the odds would be against him.

His kind of fight.

I dismiss the scrying lens. Watching Tullaris fight the daemon-worshippers pleases me, insofar

as he is bringing glory to the Bloody Handed One, but I have other matters to attend to. The sun is setting, and I must prepare for the ritual ahead.

I pull my furs tighter about me and rise from my throne. Pain runs down my back and I stumble. I catch myself on the throne's arm and wait for a second while a wave of dizziness passes. It is a long walk through the twisting corridors of my palace to the shrine where the Cauldron awaits me. There, my handmaidens will be reciting the ritual prayers and sacrificing worthy druchii. That is how my people should meet their ends, not beneath the crude axes of the humans.

My heart speeds, thumping hollowly in my chest as I move towards the door. My legs ache, my bones creak and all of me hurts. I need to be strong again. This physical weakness is intolerable. My boots are loud against the stone floor, and the sound draws the attention of the guards, who turn towards me.

'You wish to proceed to the shrine, mistress?' asks one. I do not know who he is. I have never deigned to learn the names of Tullaris's Executioners.

'I wish you to find Lord Tullaris,' I tell him, my voice a dry whisper, like paper crackling in a fire. The two guards exchange a look.

'That... may take some time, my lady,' says the other. 'And our lord would be most displeased if we left you unprotected.'

Anger flares through me, and for a moment it burns away the pain and weakness. 'You think me too frail and decrepit to defend myself?' I ask, and the Executioner recoils as if physically struck. Even in this state, they fear my wrath. I am the Bride of Khaine, and I am not to be crossed. I would think nothing of flaying these men alive and using their skins as bedding.

'No, my lady, I—'

'It would displease Lord Tullaris more to find that you were disloyal to the cult, to Khaine,' I say pointedly. 'And never forget, your master is my champion. He answers to me.'

The point is well taken. He would not be the first of Tullaris's warriors to lose his head to the First Draich on my word. He nods quickly and follows his comrade from the chamber. Slowly and painfully, I leave the chamber in their wake. It takes me a long time – I know not how long – but I pass through chambers and along corridors, and descend a long and spiralling staircase, as the shadows lengthen and darken.

In a smooth motion, Tullaris drew his dagger and threw it into the throat of one of the watching warriors. He was running before it thudded into the human's corrupted flesh, and even as the Chaos warrior slumped to the ground, the elf was pulling a thick sword from a fur scabbard. Turning, he lifted it and deflected a blow from the champion's axe. With a return stroke, he drove the sword's serrated edge into the haft of the axe, which broke in two. The champion staggered back and Tullaris pressed his attack further. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to parry a blow from a warrior with a third eye in his forehead. With a roar of bloodthirsty joy, he stabbed the blade into the human's throat and ripped it out of the side of the neck.

The warrior stood for a moment, blood gouting from the wound, then fell silently, landing face-first in the mud. Tullaris threw his sword aside and scooped up the fallen man's halberd. He ducked out of the way of a stroke from another warrior's sword and leapt, raising the halberd over his head.

'For Khaine!' shouted the Herald as he brought the halberd down on the Chaos champion, splitting his skull in twain. As the champion fell, his armour rotted and shrivelled and the First Draich slid loose into the mud. Tullaris retrieved it, turning to face the first of the six remaining Chaos warriors. The human charged at him, a mace in each hand. The barbarian's fellows

were behind him, weapons and shields raised high.

This was proving an amusing diversion.

I enter the concourse that will take me to the Shrine of Khaine, which sits at the very heart of my palace. It exists on a site of great significance, the first place that blood was shed in Naggaroth. That is why it was built there, and why Har Ganeth grew around it. My city, dedicated to murder in every sense.

I trip, and put out my left arm to arrest my fall. It is a mistake. I feel something snap in my wrist and curse my stupidity. Pain surges through me, along with adrenaline, and I draw the arm close to my chest, cradling it. Pathetic, but I cannot help it.

It is only then that I see through cloudy eyes what I tripped over. It is one of my handmaidens. Her name is Iulianeth and she has served me for over three hundred years. She has seen me at my best and my worst. She has been privy to my fury and my desires. She has shared my bed more nights than he has not. Now she is dead, and etched upon her features is pain. Terrible, torturous pain of the sort I have seen in countless victims of my displeasure.

I feel anger, fury at Iulianeth for her weakness. Letting herself be killed is unforgivable. When this is over, I will have her family rounded up and tortured for her failure to serve me.

Around me, the shadows close in.

The warriors had fallen after a hard-fought battle. Tullaris had emerged mostly unscathed, though his armour would need repairing where the mace-wielding warrior had dented the breastplate. Tullaris had moved on, continuing to hunt worthy sacrifices, but had found only empty streets and growing shadows. Night was approaching.

The Herald glanced up at Hellebron's tower once again. Up there, she would be preparing for the Death Night ritual that would return her youth and vigour. He should be there with her, as he had been every year for uncounted centuries. He had not returned to her side for weeks, since the Bloodied Horde had entered the city.

Her rage had been magnificent, but also strangely pathetic, as her infirmity had made her cough and splutter and fall to her knees even as she was declaring vengeance on all the gods of the Ruinous pantheon. Seeing the Hag Queen like always reminded Tullaris that he was in thrall to someone he could end with a single strong hand, that leadership of the cult could be his if he only reached out and took it. And yet he never did, and he wasn't entirely sure why.

Lost in his thoughts, the Herald of Khaine almost missed the movement in the shadows. He spun, the First Draich held in a defensive posture, but there was nothing there. Again, a flicker in his periphery. Another turn, and he saw a movement within the darkness, streamers of umbral matter coalescing into a figure.

A pair of legs formed first, lithe and muscular. They flowed upwards into a slender torso, which sprouted long arms and a head crowned with a mane of glossy hair. It was a woman, beautiful and cruel looking. In one hand, she carried a long staff topped with three vicious blades. She waved lazily with her other hand and Tullaris's weapon fell from suddenly nerveless fingers. Another gesture and the Executioner was forced to his knees as she moved towards him.

She was young, and breathtakingly beautiful. Her skin was as pale as marble, flecked with veins of delicate blue. Her almond eyes fixed on Tullaris's and he was flooded with memories of nights with Hellebron, but twisted to feature this stranger instead. With an effort, he broke eye contact and the visions vanished like mist in the wind. He looked away from her face and saw a rune tattooed on her stomach. The angular marks represented Ghrond. He knew who this elf was, and he knew who had sent her.

'Morathi,' Tullaris growled.

‘No, my lord Dreadbringer,’ she purred. ‘I am not Morathi, but then that wasn’t really what you were saying, was it?’

The sorceress’s voice was playful, and she circled the Herald as she spoke. He was still gripped by the spell that had pulled him to his knees, so he could not watch her as she passed behind him. He focused his mind and drew in a deep breath, trying to fight the magic that kept him helpless.

‘No, but you are one of her playthings,’ he said.

‘You have a way with words.’ The sorceress smiled lasciviously. ‘Yes, I am Morathi’s, I suppose, in the same way that you are Hellebron’s.’

‘I belong to Khaine, as does my queen,’ replied Tullaris evenly. ‘I serve her in her role as the head of the cult.’

‘And that is all?’ teased the sorceress. ‘Interesting. And perhaps that will make the offer I bear all the more... powerful.’

‘There is nothing your mistress can offer that would interest me. Leave now, witch, unless you want to feel the kiss of the First Draich.’

‘Oh, how intimidating,’ she mocked. She moved closer and cupped his chin with her free hand, studying him as a slave buyer studies a potential purchase. ‘I’m sure that you would enjoy sheathing your weapon in me, Executioner. But you really must hear what I offer. Lady Morathi, Queen of Ghroind and the mortal reincarnation of holy Hekarti, wishes to forge an alliance with the Cult of Khaine.’

I pull myself to my feet, ignoring the pain that runs up my arm from the broken wrist. Whoever – or whatever – killed Iulianeth is here. I hear breathing. I try to run, but my wretched body betrays me once again, pain and stiffness forcing me to stumble along, my good hand clutching at an unnaturally cold wall for support. I must reach the Cauldron. I must be strong.

I decide to take the most direct route, dangerous as it takes me out of my private palace complex and into the main concourse that runs through the greater palace to the public throne room. It is the culmination of a great road that runs from the outer gates of the city. Those who wish an audience with me must walk from there to here, at Har Ganeth’s heart. The symbolism is obvious, but no less powerful for that.

I know that the area has been the site of skirmishes between my forces and the invaders, but I must take the risk of being attacked. It has become a certainty that something is stalking me anyway. I can feel it. I wonder why they don’t strike when I am alone and vulnerable. Is it to make me feel fear? To try and stop my weakened heart through sheer terror? If so, it is foolish. For seven millennia, I have served Khaine, and ruled Har Ganeth for six. Fear has been burned from me. I am simply furious.

‘Face me,’ I whisper. Even if my voice could rise above that, I would not let it, not when I am trying to escape a pursuer. ‘Or do you fear me, even though I am but a wizened crone?’

My taunt brings a response. Around me, the shadows laugh.

‘Hekarti? What vanity has the queen of lies fallen into now?’

Tullaris was incredulous. The Mistress of Magic was one of the greatest of the elf pantheon. For Morathi to claim her mantle was an act of supreme arrogance. Only Malekith himself had ever dared to anoint himself the manifestation of a god, Khaine himself. And that had been a lie. Tullaris knew that for a fact, for the god had told him so.

‘She *is* Hekarti,’ said the sorceress. ‘Everything is changing, Tullaris. The gods walk the earth once more. Khaine and Asuryan will clash again, and the world will tremble. But the mythic cycles need not repeat, Tullaris. Khaine can best the phoenix. *If* he has the correct host, someone strong enough. Someone with a connection to Him...’

Tullaris turned this over in his mind. The implications were troubling, but the possibilities were undeniably enticing.

‘What is your offer, witch?’ he asked.

She turned away. ‘My mistress would have you take Hellebron’s place at the head of the cult. You will be anointed as Khaine and unite with Hekarti. Murder and magic will rule Naggaroth together.’

‘Malekith may have something to say about that.’

‘He will be dealt with,’ she said with a dismissive wave. ‘Plans are already in motion. Even now, the lord of Hag Graef is planning Malekith’s death.’

‘Darkblade?’ snorted Tullaris. ‘He will fail.’

‘Do not underestimate Malus Darkblade. There is more to him than is visible to the eye.’

‘Regardless, your offer is intriguing. You need me only to kill Hellebron?’

‘No. That is also being taken care of. We need you only to take her place.’

‘That was all I needed to know,’ said Tullaris, rising up and grabbing the sorceress by the throat.

I hurry as best I can, and eventually reach the main concourse. To my surprise, the great thoroughfare is empty. For weeks, the Chaos worshippers have been attacking it, drawn to the Shrine of Khaine, driven by their blood-soaked deity to try to defile the holy structure and install one of their champions on my throne.

The wide pathway is littered with bodies: elf, human and beastman. I drag my aching body around the corpses. Until now, I have stuck to the shadows, but there is no way to cross the street and not step into the light of the moons, one large and pale, the other small and casting a green glow across everything.

The shrine is within sight, a great edifice of crimson marble. In my haste to reach it, I fail to watch where I am going and I trip, stumble, fall. This time I do not make the mistake of putting out an arm and I land on the rotting corpse of one of my witch elves. Another weakling, to fall beneath the blade of a human or filthy halfbreed animal. Flies burst upwards and maggots writhe away from me.

And in front of me, the shadows coalesce into a figure. Female, young, clad in the colours of Ghond.

‘Of course,’ I croak as I pull myself to my knees. ‘One of Morathi’s whelps. She is taking advantage of this situation to end our feud, then.’

It is a good plan. I wish I had thought of it first.

The sorceress kneels in front of me and pulls a short knife from her belt. It is inscribed with runes that dance along the blade. She looks me in the eye.

‘Everything is changing, and Morathi needs you disposed of. Your enmity no longer amuses her. She did bid me deliver a message before this knife slips into your heart, queen of hags.’

‘Oh, please just kill me and spare me her witless prattlings,’ I say.

Enraged, she punches me and knocks me sprawling. I reach out to push myself back up and my hand touches something cold. Something metal. Khaine has delivered me once more.

‘A great change is coming.’ The sorceress yammers on. ‘My mistress has seen it. Darkness is rising and the gods walk. Khaine will be made manifest and it will be Morathi, not Hellebron, who stands at his side.’ She grips the ritual dagger in both hands and plunges it downwards.

I roll, though it causes agony to course through my body, and stab upwards with the long knife that my witch elf once carried. I am rewarded with a pained scream. She slashes out wildly and cuts my leg, a long and deep gash. I stab again and blood splatters my face. I swallow and taste it, feel the power in it. I am invigorated and I surge upwards. The pain leaves

me and a red mist descends. For a moment, I consider what some murmur, that Khaine and the bloody god the northerners worship are one and the same. I dismiss the thought as unworthy. We are not howling savages seeking skulls and gore. Though to see me now, you would not know it.

When the bloodlust lifts, I am atop a ruined mess that was once a sorceress.

I briefly regret that I did not have time to consecrate her death to Khaine.

The strength passes, and I fall. One-armed, blood streaming from a leg that is rapidly numbing around the cut – the knife was poisoned, I assume – I begin to pull myself towards my apotheosis.

Morathi's sorceress started to gesture with her free hand, but Tullaris broke her wrist. Her yelp of pain cut off as he squeezed her neck even tighter.

'You have sent assassins?' he growled.

She nodded frantically, and he slackened his grip.

'We are three,' she rasped. 'Morathi's Drakirites. I was sent to you. My sisters will be already with the Hag—'

A loud crack cut off the sorceress's words as Tullaris snapped her neck. He let the body drop to the ground. Around him, the shadows receded. A howl split the night, followed closely by another. Both came from the direction of Hellebron's palace.

'Drakirites,' he murmured. 'How theatrical.' It was just like Morathi to name assassins after the goddess of revenge, grandiose and ridiculous. The threat they posed was quite real though. Right now, two of them stalked Hellebron in the darkness of her half-abandoned palace, and only Tullaris knew it.

His murder of her emissary wouldn't change Morathi's offer. All he had to do was let the witch's sisters strike and he would be on the road to becoming one of the most powerful elves in Naggaroth. He looked up once again at the tower that split the sky and asked Khaine for guidance.

Finally, I have reached my master's shrine. Normally, I would revel in the architecture that gives glory to Khaine, great statues of him and murals showing his deeds from the Wars of the Gods. But now I am weak. I am dying. I look behind me and see a trail of my own blood stretching back to the butchered corpse of the assassin. So much blood. My arm and hip blaze with agony and I can barely feel my legs. A further painstaking effort brings me to the Cauldron.

I roll over and look up at it, and beyond to the great vaulted ceiling, decorated with paintings of Tullaris's Executioners and my witch elves. My gaze is drawn to the statue of Khaine that surmounts the Cauldron of Blood. It shows my lord clutching a dagger in one mighty hand and a heart in the other. It may as well be my heart that he carries, ready to plunge the weapon in. My death is certain now. Will he welcome me to his side, I wonder? Or will my weakness, allowing myself to be killed by a simple sorceress, ensure that I am forever damned?

I try to pull myself up the steps that lead to the Cauldron. I cannot. I try again. I will die trying. I will not give up. I laugh bitterly.

'Seven thousand years, Seven thousand years in your service, and it comes to this? I die bleeding my last on the floor of your shrine, inches from salvation?'

I close my eyes. When I open them again, it is fully dark around me. Did I fall asleep? No, with the blood I have lost, had I succumbed to unconsciousness, I would not have awakened. What then?

The shadows move and I understand. They coalesce, whirling into a elven form. Another assassin. Of course, Morathi would not just send one. She looks exactly the same as the other. I would think she had returned to life, were she not a lump of ruined meat a hundred feet away.

'I am without weapon,' I whisper. 'Without hope. I am at your mercy. Not that I expect any.'

'Would you show any, were our situations reversed?' Her voice is soft.

'No,' I confess. 'You would be dead already, or in much pain.'

'Well, be glad I am not you, Hellebron. I am not going to kill you. I must deliver a message. You need to live. You need to thwart Morathi's plans. She is mad, she—'

She is cut off, metaphorically and literally, as her head parts from her shoulders and rolls out of my line of vision. Her body stands for a second, then falls to the side and reveals the form of an Executioner, draich raised. But this is not any draich, and not any Executioner.

'Tullaris,' I say weakly. 'The Cauldron...'

He says nothing. He doesn't move. He gazes down at me, the First Draich still raised. Slowly, he pulls off his skull-helm and in his eyes is a murder-gleam. I have seen it there many times, but never has it been directed towards me.

For the first time in a long time, I know fear. And for the first time ever, I acknowledge that I need Tullaris Dreadbringer. That I love him. It is my greatest weakness. To love another, to need them, is to make yourself vulnerable to them. And I am now more vulnerable than I have ever been.

For a long moment we remain like that, and I am sure that I am going to die at the hands of my champion. My... love. Then the moment is over. He drops his weapon and kneels. He lifts me, and I sink into his arms, and allow myself to drift into unconsciousness. The last thing I feel is my body being immersed in the blood of Khaine's great Cauldron.

Tullaris watched Hellebron step out of the Cauldron of Blood. Her smooth, alabaster-pale flesh was as unmarked and perfect as the day Tullaris had first seen her, the day Khaine had first spoken to him and he had shed blood for the first time. In the wake of his divinely inspired acts of murder, she had named him her champion, and then she had taken him to her bed. The sight of her took his breath away as much as it had that night millennia ago.

Of course, even when her prevailing aspect was that of Morai-Heg, he still adored her as much as he feared her. But now, when she was freshly renewed, she was a goddess. Morathi could lay claim to being Hekarti as much as she liked. To Tullaris, Hellebron was Atharti, the Lady of Desire, made flesh.

She walked slowly, languorously, down the steps towards him, crimson liquid dripping from her and pooling on the flagstones, flowing into cracks as it had this night every year for six millennia.

Tullaris had a sudden uneasy premonition that it would never do so again.

Hellebron stopped a hand's breadth from him and looked up, triumph and lust mingling in her eyes.

'My champion,' she breathed. 'So many pleasures for us to experience together again.'

'Yes, my lady,' he replied, breathing in the scent of her body mixed with the iron tang of blood. 'And first among them, to kill by your side again. To watch you lick blood from the First Draich.'

She laughed, and it sent a chill down the Executioner's spine.

'Oh yes, my love. That and so much more. But first...' She moved quicker than even Tullaris's eye could follow, reaching to his belt and pulling his dagger from its sheath. In an instant, it was held to his throat. *'What did they offer you, Tullaris? What did they offer you to kill me?'*

'My lady?'

She pressed the knife harder against his throat. He felt it break the skin, blood welling up and running down the edge of the blade.

‘We have always been honest with one another, Tullaris. For all our many faults, we have always been honest. Don’t change that now.’

‘They offered me the cult, my queen. And a place at Morathi’s side, ruling over Naggaroth.’

She flashed him a feral grin and brought the dagger to her mouth, delicately licking the fluid from it.

‘And yet I live. I was at your mercy and you spared me.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

He looked into her eyes and what he saw there was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen. Confusion.

‘I did what my conscience told me to do, my queen.’

‘Your... *conscience*.’ She said the word as if it were foreign and unfamiliar. ‘Tullaris, I find myself at a loss. For six thousand years, you have stood by my side, and never did I expect to discover such a weakness in you.’

‘Weakness?’

‘You spared me, when you could have had power and influence beyond any druchii’s dreams. That is weakness. It is sickening.’

She turned away.

‘My lady—’

‘She was trying to tell me something.’ Hellebron knelt beside the third Drakirite’s severed head. ‘I would know what that was.’ She lifted the head and sauntered over the Cauldron, where she submerged it beneath the bubbling blood. After a few whispered incantations, she pulled it out.

And it screamed.

Gripping the head by the hair, Hellebron slapped it hard. It spun in a lazy arc, and teeth fell to the ground. It quieted, and its eyes focused on the Hag Queen.

‘What... What is happening?’ it squealed. ‘Pain. So much pain!’

‘And that pain is but a fraction of what I can make you feel,’ said Hellebron. ‘I will pull your spirit back from Ereth Khial’s clutches and inflict such tortures upon you that you cannot imagine them. Tell me what you were going to do and you might be spared that.’

‘I... I am a traitor to Morathi,’ the head said. ‘I came to warn you. She has seen what is to come, and the part you will play. She would see you dead before you can foul her plans. But her plans must fail, or we will all be doomed.’

‘Speak clearly, wretch,’ growled the Hag Queen.

‘The Rhana Dandra approaches. Doom is at hand, and gods walk the world once more.’

‘The one I killed in the streets said the same,’ said Tullaris.

‘Dreadbringer!’ The head tried to turn, to face him. Hellebron tilted it in his direction. It was decaying rapidly, flesh sloughing from a skull that looked pitted and worn. ‘You will play a role, Herald of Khaine. You will bring him into the world, though you will not live to see him.’ She paused. ‘When the Blade of Darkness is broken by what lies within, you will fall to the would-be king, and the Lord of Murder will rise anew.’

‘I am to die in Khaine’s service?’

‘That matters not,’ interrupted Hellebron. ‘What else, sorceress?’

‘The Witch King will burn and be no more, and the druchii with him. And you, Queen of Hags, you will be Bride of Khaine no longer. You will become Khorne’s mistress.’

It laughed, and the motion made the last of its flesh loosen and slip from the bone. The skull chattered for a moment before Hellebron shrieked in anger and flung it against the side of the Cauldron, where it shattered. She turned back to Tullaris.

‘Nonsense,’ she snapped. ‘A fantasy of Morathi’s design.’

Tullaris did not reply. He remembered the Drakirite he had killed in the streets. Her eyes had shone with the light of fanaticism, the fervour of a true believer. The skull’s last words haunted him. Could Hellebron really fall to the Ruinous Powers? Could her lust for murder be turned to darker purposes? He tried to dismiss the thought.

‘The Rhana Dandra,’ Hellebron spat dismissively. ‘Ancient legend and nothing more. Come, Tullaris. I have been idle too long. It is time that these barbarians discovered the true majesty of the God of Murder.’

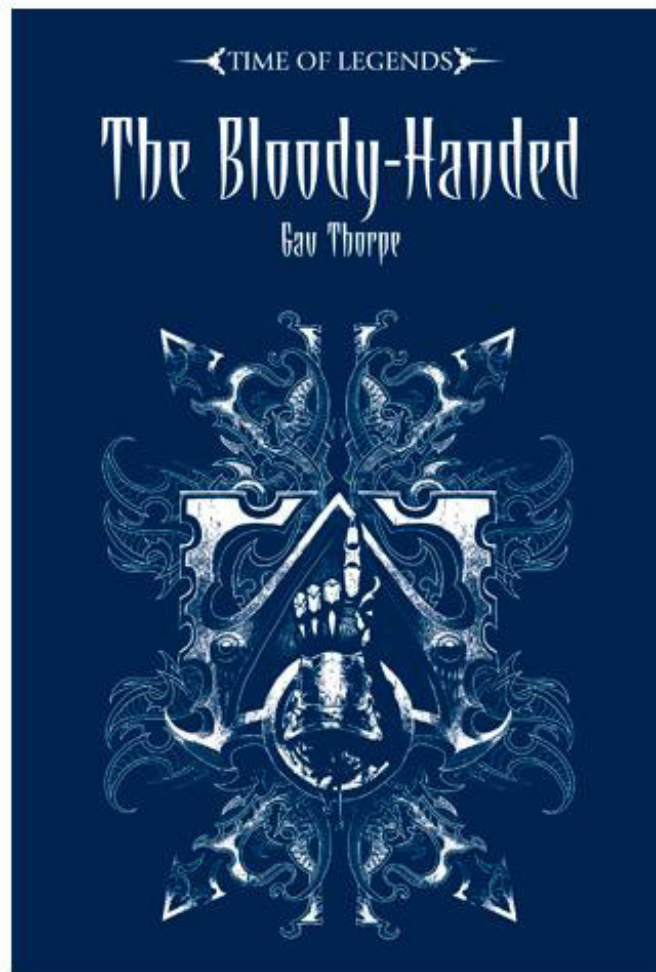
She turned back to him and in her eyes was the same look as the Drakirite. It was familiar, and welcome, and filled Tullaris with a potent mix of emotions. But beneath the look was something else. Something he had never seen in her before. It looked like disdain, and it made him want to prove himself, to show her that he was not weak. He gripped the First Draich tightly and swung it in a figure of eight.

‘Yes, my queen,’ he growled. ‘Let us get you some clothes and a weapon and we will take back our city.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graeme Lyon is the author of the Space Marine Battles novella *Armour of Faith* and the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'The Carnac Campaign: Sky Hunter', 'From the Flames' and 'Kor'sarro Khan: Huntmaster', along with the Warhammer tale 'The Hunter'. He hails from Scotland, but now splits his time between Nottingham and Dublin. It is well documented that Graeme has a deep loathing of cheese, but makes a mean chocolate chip cookie.

Life as a princess in the colony of Athel Toralien is a constant struggle for recognition and purpose. When princess Hellebron is snubbed by Queen Morathi, she vows to make a name for herself and claim her rightful place in the court at the capital.



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