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— TIME OF LEGENDS —



GOD KING

The Legend of Sigmar

GRAHAM McNEILL

New York Times bestselling author

GOD KING

A Time of Legends novel

By Graham McNeill

BOOK THREE OF THE SIGMAR TRILOGY
Sigmar, the first Emperor, is a god amongst men, a peerless leader and an unbreakable warrior. Having triumphed over the orcs at Black Fire Pass and defeated the Chaos invasion of Middenheim, the Empire knows a measure of peace. But in the vast deserts of Nehekhara, another empire is rising. Nagash, the most feared of necromancers, is determined to claim dominance over the Old World, crushing all before him with an unstoppable and nightmarish army. Legions of unnatural creatures swarm the Empire. Sigmar must defend the lands of the living from the hordes of the dead and prevent Nagash's terrible vision of power coming true.

About the Author

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. In addition to twenty novels for the Black Library, Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy stories and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*,

was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

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AENARION (audio drama)

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THE BLOODSPEARS LIFTED their weapons and the swordsmen tensed as the warrior walked slowly towards the mourners at the centre of the Morrdunn. His movements were unhurried and casual, yet Markus's expert eye caught the telltale signs of a man perfectly in balance with his body. This man was a killer, no doubt about that. He seemed utterly unafraid, which marked him either as a madman or a man who knew something Markus did not.

'Who are you?' he said, struggling to keep his voice calm. 'I am burying my son, and you are being disrespectful. That can get a man killed in these lands.'

'So can being in the wrong place at the wrong time,' said the warrior. 'But in answer to your question, I am Khaled al-Muntasir, though I am sure that will mean nothing to you.'

'You're right, it doesn't,' said Markus. 'Now begone before I have you slain.'

Khaled al-Muntasir laughed, a rich sound full of dark amusement. He smiled and swept back his cloak to reveal a slender-bladed scabbard of pale wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl and jade. The warrior placed his hand on the sword and drummed his fingers on the pommel of jet.

‘If you are looking for a fight, then you are a fool,’ said Markus.

‘I am many things, Count Markus: a man of culture, an artist, a writer of sorts and a dilettante in all things mystical. I have some knowledge of the celestial mechanics wheeling above us and am a passable tailor, weaponsmith and crafter of fine jewellery and ornaments. But one thing I am not, is a fool.’

‘Let me gut him, my lord,’ hissed Wenian, drawing his sword with a hiss of metal on leather.

Markus hesitated, knowing full well how skilful Wenian was, but fearing that any duel fought here would be an unequal match.

‘Yes, let him,’ said Khaled al-Muntasir, drawing his own weapon. The blade reflected Mannslieb’s glow such that it shone like a sliver of moonlight itself. ‘I have been cooped up too long in Athel Tamera, and it will be good to wet my blade in mortal flesh again.’

‘You talk big, fancy man, but you’ll bleed just the same,’ said Wenian, spinning his sword to loosen his shoulders.

‘Actually, I think you’ll find that—’

Wenian didn’t give him a chance to finish, launching himself at the finery-clad warrior. Khaled al-Muntasir’s blade swept up in a blur of white gold, flickering like sunlight on ice. Wenian’s charge carried him past the warrior, but before he turned, he sank to his knees and toppled to the side. His head fell from his shoulders, rolling to a halt before one of the great menhirs.

Markus was horrified. Wenian was one of the greatest swordsmen he knew, more skilful than any droyaska of the Ostagoths, and twice as fast as any Cherusen Wildman. Yet this effete warrior had beheaded him without so much as batting an eyelid.

Khaled al-Muntasir knelt beside Wenian's corpse and wiped his sword blade clean of blood. He looked up at Markus with a predatory gleam in his eyes. They were dark and liquid, like the oil that burned in sunken pools deep in the reeking canyons of the Grey Mountains, and he found it hard to look away. Markus had seen that kind of look before, in the eyes of a wolf with its prey firmly locked in its grip.

'What are you?' he said.

Khaled al-Muntasir stood and smiled. 'I am your worst nightmare. Or at least one of them.'

'Kill him,' ordered Markus, and the Bloodspears moved to surround this lone warrior. No one, no matter how skilful could survive against such numbers. Fifty spearmen advanced towards the warrior, the iron blades of their weapons aimed at the swordsman's heart.

'Really?' said Khaled al-Muntasir, as though disappointed. 'You are a king, are you not? This is the best you can do? I'm insulted you think I would fight like some common brawler. Luckily, Krell here excels at this sort of fight.'

A terrifying roar swept over the summit of Morrdunn, the echoes bouncing from the menhirs and filling every heart that heard it with the naked fear common to all prey creatures. Something moved in the shadows and a hulking red shape flew through the air to land with a crash of metal and stone in the centre of the ring of spearmen.

It was a warrior, but a warrior unlike any other.

A full head and shoulders above his tallest rival, Krell was clad in brazen plates of ancient iron so stained with blood that their original colour was impossible to gauge. A great skull rune was stamped or branded into his chest, and Markus's courage deserted him at the sight

of it. Great horns of bone extended from the monstrous warrior's helm and Markus saw Krell's face was a skeletal horror of yellowed bone and leathery flesh. A hideous emerald glow burned in his empty eye sockets, and any warrior brave enough to meet his gaze saw the manner of his death there.

A vast axe with a blade of utter darkness swung out and a dozen men died, their bodies hurled through the air like corn stalks at threshing time. The red-armoured warrior bludgeoned its way through the Bloodspears, hacking them down with insane ferocity and without mercy. Khaled al-Muntasir watched the slaughter impassively, as though bored by such violence.

In seconds, every warrior of the Bloodspears was dead, chopped into ragged hunks of gory meat. It was impossible to tell one warrior's remains from another, such was the scale of butchery. Markus ran to his wife and daughter, gathering them to him and shielding them from the whirlwind of destruction that killed his warriors.

The sword bands fared no better; cut down in a frenzy of bloodletting that left Markus horrified and disbelieving. The summit of the Morrdunn was soaked in blood, the ground sodden with the vital fluid of a hundred men, slain in less time that it would take to count them. The slaughterman returned to Khaled al-Muntasir's side, a constant stream of blood pouring from the black blade of his axe.

Only now did the swordsman look interested in the slaughter. A thin network of veins pulsed beneath the skin of his temples, his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared at the bitter reek of blood on the air.

'Ulric preserve us,' whispered Markus, backing away from the two warriors.

‘The wolf god?’ smiled Khaled al-Muntasir. ‘He won’t hear you. And if he does, he won’t care. Isn’t that what his priests teach, that his followers should be self-reliant?’

‘You are daemons,’ said Markus, drawing his sword and standing before his family. ‘Fight me if you must, but let my wife and daughter live. They are innocents and do not deserve this.’

‘Innocent?’ hissed Khaled al-Muntasir, as though enjoying the taste of the word. ‘There is no such thing in this world. Just by being born mankind corrupts this world. Every step a mortal takes, he destroys a little piece of it. No, do not think to appeal to me with thoughts of compassion. I forgot that emotion before your tribe even crossed the eastern mountains.’

‘What are you?’ demanded Markus.

Khaled al-Muntasir stepped closer, and Markus saw that the pale hue of his complexion had nothing to do with the moonlight. Khaled al-Muntasir smiled, revealing two elongated fangs descending from his upper jaw.

‘You are a blood drinker!’ hissed Markus. ‘A creature of the dead.’

‘I cannot deny the truth,’ said Khaled al-Muntasir. ‘And your daughter’s terror is such a tantalising sweetmeat that I think I shall leave her until last. As much as it would give me great pleasure to make you watch them die, I will savour her terror all the more as she watches her parents bled dry before her young eyes.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ said Markus, fighting to control his terror of this beast of the night. His blood was sluggish in his veins, and it was all he could do to keep hold of his sword.

‘It is not I,’ said Khaled al-Muntasir. ‘I am but a humble servant in this drama.’

A vast shadow moved in the darkness behind the warrior, a slice of the deepest, darkest night given form and motion. As Krell towered over Khaled al-Muntasir, so too did this giant figure loom over them all. It stepped into the flickering circle of light cast by the fallen torches, yet no hint of illumination touched its blackened form.

A mighty figure cloaked in night and armour from the darkest forges of the damned, its eyes burned with the same green light as shimmered in Krell’s vacant skull. One arm clutched a forked staff in the form of an elongated snake while the other had a sickly metallic sheen to it, like iron with a rainbow scum of oil slithering across its surface.

Grotesque and twisted with vile animation, the grim visage was that of death itself, a horror cast from the nightmares of men and women since the dawn of time. Markus’s wife fainted dead away with horror, and he felt his own fragile grip on sanity slipping in the face of such irrevocable knowledge of his own death. His sword fell to the ground and tears spilled from his eyes as he turned his daughter’s face away from the monster.

She sobbed uncontrollably, and Markus knew it would be a mercy to cut her throat rather than have her face what was to come. Until this moment, Markus had not feared death, knowing his courage in battle would surely earn him a place in Ulric’s Hall. One look into the lambent pits of this horror’s eyes told him there would be no journey to the next life to hunt in the forests of eternal winter. Even the horror of the grave, with cold earth embracing his rotting flesh and the worms growing fat on his meat was to be denied him. Compared to the

fate this creature was soon to visit upon them, such an end would be a mercy.

Markus dropped to his knees before this dreadful apparition as it closed on him.

‘It is fitting that you give homage to the new lord of these lands,’ said Khaled al-Muntasir.

Markus fumbled for his dagger, thinking to end his and his family’s life, but before his hand even closed on the hilt, the blood drinker was at his side and holding him in an unbreakable grip, the cold flesh of his face inches from his own.

‘No, not yet,’ whispered Khaled al-Muntasir. ‘Not when there are such sights left to see.’

Darkness boiled from the towering black warrior’s form, filling the sky with unnatural gloom, blotting out the moon and filling the sky with evil clouds and the screeching of bats. Wolves howled in the darkness, blood-hungry beasts of the deep forest, not the noble creatures of the northern woods that carried the chill winds of Ulric in their veins. The darkness closed on Hyrstdunn, obscuring it from view, but Markus heard the screams and knew his city was doomed.

‘I want you to say his name,’ said Khaled al-Muntasir.

‘I don’t know it,’ said Markus, wishing that were true.

‘Come now,’ chided Khaled al-Muntasir, digging a manicured nail into his throat. ‘It lives in mortal minds as a nightmare of distant lands and forgotten days. It is a name of death that travels with fearful tale-tellers and poisons the lips of scared men huddled around fires in the foolish belief that they are safe from his reach. Say it, mortal. Say it now.’

‘No,’ wept Markus. ‘I cannot.’

‘Of course you can, it’s just wind noises passing through your throat.’

‘He is... he is...’

‘That’s it, go on,’ urged the blood drinker.

‘He is Nagash,’ said Markus, spitting the name like a curse.

As though giving voice to the name of the dread necromancer from the ancient horror tales gave it power, the mighty form slammed its vile metal hand into the earth of the Morrdunn. A booming peal of thunder split the heavens and the green light in Nagash’s eyes blazed with incredible power, flowing through his withered, monstrous body to pour into the earth of the Empire like a corruption.

Flickering green light danced over Markus’s son’s body, like wisps of corpse light in the swamps. Though he was cold and dead, Vartan sat up with stiff movements, as some dread force other than his own wasted muscles empowered him. Markus wept at this violation of his son’s flesh, hating these beings of darkness more than he had hated anything in his life.

Vartan turned his dead gaze upon Markus, the cold empty green light flickering in his sunken, shrivelled eyes. Cold horror crept over Markus as his son stood on limbs he himself had washed and oiled the night before, the metal links of Vartan’s armour clinking together as he took his place at the blood drinker’s side.

The ground of the hill trembled and a deep groaning from its heart rumbled far beneath Markus’s feet. The grass rippled, as though an army of snakes writhed beneath its surface, and a hand punched up through the earth. Dried flesh clung to the bones and fragments of rusted armour emerged as the dead warrior clawed its way from beneath the hill.

More and more followed it, hundreds of Menogoth dead torn from their eternal rest by the dark sorcery of the ancient necromancer. The hill shook as the honoured slain broke open their mausolea, tombs and barrows and marched to the summit of the Morrdunn.

Markus felt his anger crowd out his fear, but Khaled al-Muntasir's grip was unbreakable.

'Know that your Emperor's realm is doomed,' said the blood drinker. 'Know that all you love will die and rise again to serve this army of darkness. Know this and despair!'

Khaled al-Muntasir's fangs sank into his neck and Markus felt his life being sucked from his flesh. Yet as he slipped down into the black abyss of death, his thoughts were that once again the Menogoths had failed their Emperor.

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