

# Guardians of the Forest

By Graham McNeill

LEOFRIC, A KNIGHT who been raised to fear the dark forest of Loren since birth, is plunged into that strange realm when he is drawn into a plot to avert a magical disaster of cataclysmic proportions. Joined by the ferocious wood elf Kyarno, they must avert a plot by the monstrous beastmen to corrupt the land with their Chaotic influence. As the forces of magic run wild, can wood elves and humans put aside their differences for long enough to defeat the evil forces of Chaos?



*Graham McNeill hails from Scotland and narrowly escaped a career in surveying nearly five years ago to join Games Workshop's Games Development team. As well as six novels, he's also written a host of short stories for Inferno! and takes on more freelance work than can be healthy.*

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## *from GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST*

LEOFRIC COULD FEEL the tension in the men-at-arms around him as they rode through the cold, autumn morning, sensing it in their stiff, awkward movements and strained conversation. He felt apprehension too, but hid it beneath an aloof exterior. It would not do to show nervousness to the lower orders and it would only serve to unsettle his men more were they to sense their lord's unease.

The day was cold and Leofric could feel the coming winter in the sharpness of the air and see it in the golden leaves of the few trees they had passed. The further east through the dukedom of Quenelles he and his soldiers rode, the more scattered patches of snow he saw, the little-used roadway unnaturally dotted in crisp white with drifting clouds of icy mist clinging to the muddy ground.

Thirty nervous-looking peasant men-at-arms rode behind him, their yellow surcoats bright and stark against the dreary landscape. A cold wind blew off the mountains far to the south, their soaring dark peaks cloaked in shawls of snow and despite the thick, woollen undergarments Leofric wore and the padded jerkin beneath his magnificent plate armour, he could still feel the coming cold deep in his bones.

'How far is it to the forest now?' said a voice beside him.

Leofric reined in his tall grey gelding and twisted in the saddle to smile at his wife, Helene, who was riding side-saddle on a slender bay mare. She wore a long gown of red velvet and was wrapped in a thick cloak of bearskin from a great beast Leofric himself had slain with a single lance thrust while on the hunt. Tousled blonde hair spilled around her

shoulders and despite her smile, a worry line just above the bridge of her nose spoke to Leofric of her unease.

‘Not far now, my dear,’ answered Leofric, raising the visor of his helmet. ‘Lady willing, perhaps another mile or so.’

Helene nodded and shivered beneath her cloak.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Leofric, guiding his horse alongside his wife’s and detaching his long wolf-pelt cloak from his carved, silver pauldrons.

‘No, I’m fine,’ she answered. ‘It’s not the cold. It’s... well, you know what it is.’

Leofric nodded. He too could instinctively feel the forest’s fey presence on the air, a ghostly, feathery sensation down his spine as though a thousand eyes were spying upon him. His instincts had always served him well as a warrior and he fought the urge to draw the broad-bladed sword that hung at his waist.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Leofric, patting a canvas sack that hung from his saddle, ‘once we reach the waystone, it will only be a matter of hours before we are on our way back to the castle and our son. I will have Maixent prepare a hot bath for you and we will all eat roast venison before a roaring fire in the grand hall, then the three of us shall fall asleep together.’

‘That sounds heavenly,’ agreed Helene. ‘I just hope little Beren isn’t giving old Maixent too much trouble. You know what he’s like when we’re not with him.’

‘If he is, he’ll soon regret it,’ said Leofric, remembering the punishments meted out to him at the hands of the castle’s sharp-tempered chamberlain. ‘It will teach him the virtue of discipline.’

‘He’s only three, Leofric.’

‘A boy is never too young to learn the duties and responsibilities of a knight of Bretonnia,’ said Leofric sternly.

Helene stood in the wide footrest of her sidesaddle to kiss her husband and said, ‘You’re adorable when you’re being all serious.’

Leofric Carrard was a tall man, powerfully muscled from long years of wielding a long lance and wearing heavy plate armour into battle. He carried himself like the warrior he was, confident, brave and noble – every inch a knight of Bretonnia. A dark moustache and a triangular wisp of beard below his bottom lip were his only concession to vanity, and his clear green eyes were like chips of emerald set in an angular, regal face that plainly wore the cares of his twenty-five years.

Another horse drew near and a heavysset man with a long beard halted his mount in a splash of mud. He wore a yellow surcoat over a jerkin of studded leather armour, a domed sallet helmet and carried a long, iron-tipped spear. He was accompanied by a similarly dressed figure, a young boy of no more than thirteen summers who carried a tall banner pole. Atop the banner, a fringed pennant of gold depicting a scarlet unicorn rampant below a bejewelled crown snapped in the wind – the banner of Leofric Carrard, lord and master of these lands.

‘My lord–’ began the heavysset man, respectfully touching the brim of his helmet.

‘What is it, Baudel?’ said Leofric.

‘Begging your pardon, my lord, but we had best not be dawdling here,’ explained Baudel, Leofric’s chief man-at-arms. ‘Best we don’t get caught out in the open this close to the forest folk’s realm. This time of year it ain’t good to be outside.’

‘It’s never a good time to be outside according to you, Baudel,’ pointed out Leofric.

‘Aye, nor it is, my lord,’ said Baudel, nodding to the east. ‘Leastwise not near Athel Loren, anyway.’

‘Don’t speak that name, Baudel,’ chided Helene. ‘They say the faerie folk can hear when mortals name their land and are much vexed by how ugly it sounds from our mouths.’

‘Begging your pardon, milady,’ apologised Baudel. ‘I meant nothing by it.’

'You're right though, Baudel,' agreed Leofric, looking into the lifeless grey skies, 'best to be done with this and away before night falls. Prithard of Carcassonne sends word of beastman warbands in his lands – the damn things are everywhere now.'

'My lord!' scoffed Baudel. 'The Distressed is always sending word of such things. He worries when he has nothing to worry about!'

'True,' agreed Leofric, 'but this time I think he might not be crying wolf. I have had similar correspondence from Anthelme and Raynor, men not known for their scare-mongering.'

'All the more reason to be away from here sooner rather than later.'

Leofric nodded, saying, 'And I wish to be near that damned forest not one second longer than I have to be.'

'Hush, Leofric,' said Helene. 'Don't say such things.'

'I'm sorry, my love. I apologise for such language, but you know...'

'Yes,' said Helene, reaching out to lay a hand on Leofric's vambrace. 'I know.'

Leofric patted his wife's hand and gave her a forced smile before snapping down the visor of his helmet and raking back his spurs.

'Ride on!' he yelled, setting off along the road that led towards Athel Loren.

A LOW MIST closed in around the riders, deadening sound and imparting a ghostly quality to the soldiers that followed Leofric as he rode ever eastwards. The road, which had never been more than an overgrown mud track, little travelled and little cared for, petered out to nothing more than a flattened earthen line, barely distinguishable from the rest of the landscape.

The lands of Bretonnia were rich and fertile, the soil dark and fecund, its landscape tilled by the peasants, its

sweeping plains of the dukedoms open and green. Unlike the thickly forested realm of the Empire far to the north over the Grey Mountains that embraced the new sciences of alchemy, astrology and engineering, the realm of Bretonnia kept to the ancient ways of chivalric conduct. The beloved King Leoncoeur maintained the codes of behaviour set down by King Louis over a thousand years ago and held by the grail monks in the Chapel of Bastonne.

By such martial codes of honour did the knights of Bretonnia uphold their honour and defend their king's lands. To be a knight of Bretonnia was to be a warrior of great skill, noble bearing and virtuous heart, a paragon of all that was honourable.

Leofric felt his right hand slip from the emblazoned reins of his horse and grasp the hilt of his sword as he crested the misty summit of a low rise and saw a dark line of green and gold on the horizon.

Athel Loren...

For centuries this forest had lived in the dreams and nightmares of the Bretonnian people. Even from here, Leofric could feel the power that lay within the dark depths of the forest, a drowsy, dreaming energy that clawed its way into the landscape like the roots of a tree. Dark oaks stood like sentinels at the forest edge, their branches high and leafy, a mixture of greens and russet browns.

Cold mists hugged the ground leading towards the forest, a wild, scrubby heath of unkempt grasses and thorns with stagnant pools of water and lumpen, snow-covered mounds of earth. Here and there, Leofric could see a rusted sword blade, spear point or arrowhead and the occasional bleached whiteness of bone.

No matter how many times he had come to enact the traditional family ritual, the sight of this ancient battlefield always unsettled him, as though restless spirits of the dead still haunted this bleak landscape.

'It's not like I imagined it to be,' said Helene, her voice just a little too shrill.

'No?'

'No, it's... it's, well, I don't know, but I thought it would look different. Given what you've told me I expected something more... unnatural.'

'Trust me, my dear,' said Leofric, 'there is nothing natural about this place.'

'I don't like it though,' said Helene, pulling her cloak tighter about herself. 'It feels like death here.'

'Aye,' agreed Leofric, 'it is a place of darkness.'

'What are those?' asked Helene, pointing to the raised mounds of earth and stone.

Riding alongside Leofric's wife, Baudel said, 'They say that those mounds are burial cairns, raised by the first tribes of men to come this way.'

'Really?' asked Helene, ignoring Leofric's disapproving gaze. 'What else do they say?'

'Well,' continued Baudel, warming to his theme. 'My old da used to tell us that an evil necromancer once raised the dead from their tombs and tried to destroy Athel Loren itself.'

'I know that story!' nodded Helene. 'His army entered the forest and was never seen again. Do you know what happened?'

'It was the forest, milady,' said Baudel, lowering his voice theatrically. 'My old da said that it was the forest what came alive and destroyed his skeleton army.'

'Hush, Baudel!' snapped Leofric. 'Do not be filling my wife's head with such nonsense. If this necromancer existed at all, then no doubt he was killed by the elves of the forest. That's what they are good at, killing and stealing what is not theirs!'

'Sorry, my lord,' said Baudel, suitably chastened.

'Oh, come now, husband, surely it's just a story,' said Helene.

Leofric stopped and turned his horse to face his wife, his face drawn and serious. He shook his head and said, 'Helene, I love you with all my heart, but you are from Lyonesse, not Quenelles.'

'What has that to do with anything?'

'It means you have not grown up in the shadow of the faerie forest, not had to lock and bolt your doors on certain nights to be sure that elven princelings do not come and steal away your children. You have never had to spend days with every gate and shutter drawn as the wild hunt thunders through the sky, killing everything in its path. Trust me on this, we will find no welcome here.'

Helene opened her mouth to let fly a witty riposte, but saw a familiar look she had come to know all too well in her husband's eyes and the quip died in her throat. She nodded and said, 'Then let us be about our business.'

Leofric nodded curtly and turned his horse back towards the forest. The mist thinned as they drew near the forest's edge and he saw the familiar sight of the waystone within the passing of an hour. It reared up atop a flowering mound of grass, its smooth grey surface carved and painted with symbols and spirals, meaningless to him, but which nevertheless raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

He looked left and right, knowing that there were other stones spread evenly along the edge of the forest, but unable to see them due to the clammy mist that the sun seemed unable to burn away.

The knight guided his horse into a hollow depression in the earth with an icy pool at its base and a low cluster of rocks and bushes gathered around its ragged circumference. The top of the looming waystone was still visible, but the majority of its unsettling form was hidden from sight by the lay of the land.

'Halt!' he shouted as he reached the base of the hollow, dragging on his reins and bringing his horse to a halt. He rose in his stirrup and swung his leg over the fine saddle,



its leather the colour of polished mahogany. As he dismounted, he saw that the tasselled ends of the yellow and scarlet caparison were muddy and stained, but it couldn't be helped. The gelding was named Taschen, standing seventeen hands high with wide shoulders and powerful muscles that could carry his armoured weight into battle without effort. King Leoncoeur himself had presented the magnificent animal to Leofric after he had saved the king's life during the charge against the daemon prince at Middenheim...

Leofric pushed the thought away, unwilling to relive the terrible memories of the horrific days defending the great northern city of the Empire from the traitor knight Archaon.

He handed Taschen's reins to his squire, a lad whose name he hadn't bothered to learn after his previous squire, Lauder, had died screaming with a beastman's spear in his gut.

The rest of his soldiers drew up in a circle around their lord, dismounting and walking their horses before brushing them down and loosening their girths. Compared to Leofric's steed, the men-at-arms' mounts were poor specimens indeed, and did not bear any heraldic devices or caparison, their riders' lowborn status prohibiting them from doing so.

Leofric marched over to his wife's horse, the reddish brown coat of which was silky and well cared for. He reached up and helped her dismount gracefully from the saddle, smiling as she hitched up her long red robes to avoid the worst of the autumnal mud.

'I warned you that your dress would get muddy,' he said gently.

'And I told you that I didn't care,' she said with a smile. 'I've grown tired of this gown anyway. My ladies tell me that red is very passé for this time of year and that you should be buying me something in lavender next season.'

'Oh they do, do they?' said Leofric. 'Then the peasantry must work harder next year to pay for it.'

'Indeed they shall,' said Helene and they laughed, not noticing the pained looks on the men-at-arms' faces at their overheard conversation.

Leofric turned from Helene and removed the canvas sack from his saddle, shouting orders to his men and directing them to the ice-covered pool at the base of the hollow. The men began breaking the thinner ice at the edge of the pool with the butts of their spears, taking it in turns to lead the horses to drink.

Leofric and Helene's horses drank their fill first as was only right and proper.

The knight of Quenelles moved to the far side of the icy pool as his squire struggled to lift a gilt-edged reliquary adorned with woodcuts from the back of his dray horse and carried it over towards Leofric.

'Set it down there,' ordered Leofric, pointing to a flat rock before him and drawing his sword, a magnificent blade as long as the butt of a lance and fully three fingers wide. Though it was stronger than steel, the sword weighed less than the wooden swords the peasants trained with and could cut through armour with lethal ease. Its blade was silver steel and shone as though captured starlight had somehow been trapped in its forging. The sword had been touched by the Lady of the Lake herself many centuries ago and had been passed down the line of Carrard since time before memory. Leofric knew that it was a great honour to bear such a blessed weapon and that when he could no longer carry out his duty to defend his lands and people, he would pass it to Beren, his only son and heir.

Leofric's squire gently set down the reliquary before his master. The box was crafted from young saplings hewn from the Forest of Chalons and carved with stirring scenes that told of the heroic battles of Gilles le Breton, legendary founder of Bretonnia.

Atop the box, an image of the Lady of the Lake, goddess of the Bretonnians, was picked out in silver and rendered with swirling golden tresses. Leofric dropped to his knees as his squire closed his unworthy eyes and opened the winged doors of the reliquary.

The insides of the reliquary were painted with scenes of wondrous lakes and pools of reflective water, with the image of a breathtakingly beautiful woman rising from the depths. A deep cushion of sumptuous red velvet sat within the reliquary, together with the broken hilt of a sword and a faded scrap of cloth, its golden edges frayed and torn.

Leofric closed his eyes, feeling the peace of the Lady's presence wash over him at the sight of such holy relics: the faerie flag, a scrap of shimmering material supposedly torn from the cloak of an elven princeling by Leofric's great grandfather after he chased him from Castle Carrard, and the hilt of a Carrard sword that had cut down the orc warlord, Skargor of the Massif Orcal.

Leofric reached out and ran his gauntleted fingers along the broken hilt and folded cloth as he began his prayers to the Lady.

'Lady, bless me your humble servant, grant me the strength to confront those who ignore the wisdom and beauty of your holy light. You, whose bounty is with me all the days of my life, grant the lands I defend in your name the peace that this appeasement might bring...'

AS LEOFRIC BEGAN his prayers to the Lady, Helene sat upon a rock at the edge of the cold pool, gathering her skirts beneath her to make it marginally less uncomfortable. She felt a coldness here, and not just the coldness of the coming winter – something deeper chilled her. She looked back over her shoulder, seeing the gently swaying treetops of Athel Loren and the very tip of the tall waystone that marked the edge of the elven realm.

Strange that the forest did not grow beyond the stones. Idly, Helene wondered why, but then put the thought from her mind as Baudel approached with a pewter plate laden with cuts of cold beef, apples and a wedge of pungent cheese.

‘Some lunch, milady?’

‘No thank you, Baudel,’ she said. ‘I’m not really feeling hungry at the moment.’

‘I’d ask you to reconsider, milady. It’ll be a good few hours before we get back to the castle. Nice cheese, fresh beef to keep you going till then?’

‘Very well, Baudel,’ said Helene, accepting the plate.

Baudel turned to leave, but Helene looked over at Leofric with a concerned expression and said, ‘Sit with me awhile. I want to talk.’

‘Milady,’ nodded the man-at-arms and sat on a nearby rock, his spear still held upright.

‘Baudel, does Leofric seem different to you?’

‘I’m not sure I follow, milady,’ replied Baudel, guardedly.

‘Yes you do,’ said Helene. ‘Ever since he came back from the Empire and the battles against the northern tribes I’ve felt a distance between us. You were there too, Baudel, does he seem changed... after the war, I mean?’

‘War changes a man, milady.’

‘I know that, Baudel, I’m not some milkmaid from Brionne. He’s gone off to fight before, but he’s never come back like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘Withdrawn and unwilling to talk about what happened.’

Baudel sighed and glanced over the pool at Leofric who was still kneeling before the Carrard reliquary, deep in his prayers. ‘It wouldn’t be right, me speaking out of turn about my lord and master, milady.’

‘It’s all right, I give you leave to speak your mind.’

‘I appreciate that, milady, but it still wouldn’t be right.’

Seeing the defensive look in the man-at-arms's eyes, Helene nodded and said, 'Very well, Baudel, your loyalty to your master is commendable.'

'Thank you, milady.'

'If you won't tell me what happened, at least tell me of Middenheim, it sounds like a magnificent place.'

'Aye,' nodded Baudel, 'it's grand all right, you've never seen nothing like it, milady, perched on top of a great big rock they call the Ulricsberg, higher than the lighthouse of l'Anguille by a long ways. To look at it you'd think nothing could take it, not man, not monster or nothing. But them northmen had wizards, dragons and other flyin' things that tore the place up with fire and magic, and they damn near won.'

'But they didn't, did they,' stated Helene.

'No, they didn't, but it was a close run thing, let me tell you,' said Baudel, darkly. 'The king himself led a hundred knights in the charge that faced a great daemon lord. Leofric rode in that charge and only the king and a handful of his knights rode out from that battle and... and you're a clever one aren't you, milady, getting me to spill my guts like that.'

Helene shrugged, realising that she would get no more from Baudel this day. She nibbled on a cut of meat and broke off a piece of cheese.

'It was devious of me wasn't it?' she admitted with a smile.

'Downright cunning,' agreed Baudel, rising from his seat.

'One last thing before you go,' said Helene.

'Yes?' asked Baudel, warily.

'Why can't I hear any birds or animals here? It's all very quiet apart from us.'

'The forest sleeps milady. It's waiting, just waiting for spring. As for the animals, well I think that perhaps they're all getting ready to sleep away the winter.'

'Yes, that must be it, Baudel. Thank you.'

'You're most welcome, milady,' said the man-at-arms, making an extravagant bow before turning and making his way back down to the pool where the rest of the soldiers looked to their mounts or ate hunks of hard bread moistened by a thin gruel.

Helene watched him go, frowning and cursing herself for being too obvious. Baudel might be a peasant, but he was cleverer than most and had seen through her, admittedly clumsy, gambit.

She shivered again, feeling a crawling sensation up her spine and the ghostly caress of something unseen. Nothing stirred the air or broke the unnatural silence around her, save the hushed conversations of Leofric's soldiers. The cold was seeping through her furs and she wished to be away from this place, back in the castle with little Beren clutched close to her as she read him tales of heroic knights who slew evil dragons.

She missed her little boy and hoped that this strange ritual of the Carrard family would not take too long.

Helene still didn't understand the full significance of the ritual Leofric was here to perform, something to do with planting a seedling before the waystone and making an offering to the faerie folk.

Apparently, the practice had begun eighty years ago when family legend told that a much loved ancestor of Leofric's had been taken by the elves as a young boy and had never been seen again. Carrards had been coming to the edge of Athel Loren every five years since then to enact its quaint traditions.

She knew that Leofric begrudged such entreaties to the elven realm, though understood that he would never think of leaving the ritual unperformed, as such a stain upon the family honour would be unthinkable to a knight of Bretonnia.

As she watched her husband pray, she smiled, feeling the love she had for him as a contented warmth in her heart.

She remembered the sun-drenched tilting fields outside Couronne where she had first met Leofric, picturing the dashing young knight errant with his scarlet unicorn pennant streaming from his lance as he unhorsed Chilfroy of Artois, a feat none of the gathered knights and dukes ever expected to see in their lifetimes.

Leofric had had the pick of the ladies that day, all wishing him to carry their favour upon his lance, but he had knelt before her, Helene du Reyne, sweat-streaked hair plastered across his forehead and a mischievous grin creasing his face.

'It would honour me greatly if you would consent to grant me your favour,' he'd said.

'Why should I do such a thing?' she had replied, straining for a regal aloofness.

'Lady, I have unhorsed my opponent in the glory of the joust!' he said. 'None other than the Duke of Artois himself. I am the greatest warrior here!'

'You are arrogant, young man, and have not the humility of a knight.'

'It is not arrogance if it is the truth,' he had pointed out.

'How do I know that for sure?'

'Tell me how I may prove it to you, my lady, for I love you and would ride to every corner of Bretonnia if you would but grant me a kiss.'

'Only the corners of Bretonnia? Is that all?'

'Not at all, I would ride to far Araby and drag back the greatest sultan were you to look favourably my way.'

'Just to Araby?' she had teased.

'Only to begin with,' he had continued with a smile. 'Then I would sail to the far jungles of Lustria and bring back the treasures of the heathen gods if you might consent to speak my name.'

'Impressive.'

'I'm only just getting started,' he said. 'I've the rest of the world to travel yet!'

Deciding she had teased him enough, Helene had laughed and handed him a silken blue scarf, edged in white lace, and said, 'Here, you may carry my favour, sir knight. Win me this tourney and I might let you attempt to make me happy...'

'I shall, my lady! I will unhorse every man here if it will make you happy!'

And he had. Leofric had defeated every knight at the tournament before courting her as diligently and as wonderfully as any young woman could want. They were wed in the grail chapel in Quenelles a year later, and ten months after that, Helene had borne Leofric a strong son, whom they had named Beren, after one of the heroic Companions of Gilles.

Beren was so like his father, proud and with the haughty arrogance of noble youth. Though since Leofric had come back from the Errantry Wars in the north, a knight errant no more, but a knight of the realm, he had lost much of his former boisterousness.

Such was only to be expected, for a knight of the realm was tempered in battle, the fiery impetuosity of a knight errant moulded into a dutiful warrior.

But there was more to it than that. Helene knew her husband well enough to know that something more terrible than a bloody charge had happened in the war that had engulfed the Empire.

What had turned her fiery husband into a melancholy warrior who saw the cloud rather than the silver lining, the rain, not the nourished crops?

She finished the last of the beef and cheese and set down the plate on the rock beside her, feeling a shiver ripple its way along her spine.

'Colder than a Mousillon night,' she whispered to herself, as the sound of a soft, mournful weeping drifted on the air from above.

Helene twisted around, wondering if she had perhaps imagined the sound when it came again... a barely audible



sobbing that tugged at her maternal heart. Unbidden tears welled in the corners of her eyes as she listened to the unseen mourner, the sound reaching deep inside her and touching something primal in her very soul as she realised that the sobs were those of a child.

She rose from the rock and turned her gaze towards the forest.

The sound of the weeping child came again, beguiling and wistful, and, without conscious thought, Helene began walking towards the edge of the hollow. She glanced over her shoulder, seeing the yellow-surcoated men-at-arms gathered at the base of the hollow while Leofric continued his prayers.

She considered bringing the unearthly sound to the attention of her husband and his soldiers, but even before the thought was fully formed it was plucked from her head and vanished like morning mist, replaced with an insistent, urgent need to find the crying child.

Helene climbed from the hollow, the full majesty of the forest stretching out before her. The thick trunks of the mighty trees seemed to lean towards her, their branches sad with leaves of autumn gold. Leaves lay thick and still about the trees' roots and blew in a soft wind that whistled between the branches like an ancient lament.

Coils of greenish mist crept from the treeline, but Helene ignored them, her attention fixed on the sight of a young girl child kneeling at the edge of the woods, clad only in an ankle-length nightgown of pale cream. The child's back was to her, and Helene's heart went out to the child, whose long black hair fell about her shoulders and reached almost to the ground.

'Oh, my dear...' wept Helene as she saw the distraught condition of the child, feet stained green with grass, and twigs and branches caught in her hair.

Was this what had happened to Leofric's ancestor? Had he been snatched as a child and left to die on this bleak

moorland before the great forest of Athel Loren? Was this one of those poor unfortunate children taken by the elves, never to be seen again?

Helene took a step forward, hearing the jingle of trace and whinny of horses from behind her, and the thought of fetching help once again came to her.

The little girl let out a grief-stricken sob and all desires, except that of aiding this poor, wretched child, were banished from her thoughts.

'Hello? Child, can you hear me?' asked Helene, taking yet more steps forward, feeling a growing fear settle in her belly with each mist-wreathed footfall. Dim lights flickered at the periphery of her vision and she had the fleeting impression of haunting melodies of aching loss from far away.

The child did not reply and though Helene tried to stop herself, she felt her arm reaching towards the young girl and said, 'Please...'

Her hand closed on the girl's shoulder and Helene sobbed in terror, feeling the softness of her flesh as a mulchy wetness.

The child's dark-haired head slowly turned to face her, and Helene whimpered in terror as she saw that this was no innocent child, but a thing of horror.

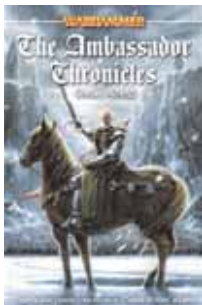
In an instant, the blackness of the girl's hair thinned, becoming a whipping tangle of thorned barbs, her face a haggard crone's, full of heartless spite and wicked malice. The nightgown sloughed from the thing's body, its greenish skin transforming into lashing wood, its fingers stretching into razored talons.

The creature of the forest leapt upon Helene with snapping fangs and slashing claws that ripped and bit and tore.

Helene screamed and screamed as pain and blood filled her senses.

*Also by Graham McNeill*

## **THE AMBASSADOR CHRONICLES**



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