

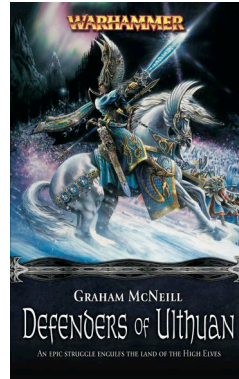
DEFENDERS OF ULTHUAN

A Warhammer novel

By Graham McNeill

Noble and proud, the high elves stand fast on their island home of Ulthuan, defending their homeland against the ravages of Chaos and the depredations of their evil kin, the dark elves. In the first part of this epic saga of war, betrayal and redemption, two brothers fight against a backdrop of war as the dark elves launch a massive invasion of Ulthuan. Can the high elves drive back the invaders before unimaginable forces of magic are unleashed?

Classic high fantasy from Graham McNeill, the author of Guardians of the Forest.



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 nine novels, Graham has written a host of SF and Fantasy stories and comics. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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The following is an excerpt from *Defenders of Ulthuan* by Graham McNeill.

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A RED GLOW LIT the dusky horizon behind the three Eagle ships as they patrolled the south-western coastline of Ulthuan, their silver hulls like knife blades as they cut through the green waters. Captain Finlain of *Finubar's Pride* watched the craggy peaks of the Dragonspine Mountains and the smoke-wreathed Vault's Anvil recede as his small flotilla made its way towards its evening berthing upon the sandy shores of Tiranoc.

The thin strip of coastline of this rugged kingdom had once reached out beyond where his ships now sailed, but ancient malice and powerful magic had destroyed this once fair realm. Monstrous tides had swept over the plains of Tiranoc in ages past, sweeping thousands to their deaths and submerging its ripened fields and glorious cities forever beneath the waves. Only the mountains and the bleak haunches of land that huddled at their feet remained above the water now and Finlain knew navigating this close to the shore was always fraught with danger.

'Sounding,' said Finlain, his voice muffled by the low mist that hugged the surface of the water and slithered over his vessel's hull.

'All's well, captain,' came the reply from Meruval, the *Pride's* navigator. Finlain glanced over to the prow of his ship, where the mage Daelis sat in a high backed chair of ivory coloured timber, his eyes closed as he probed the waters and mists ahead with his magical sight for any dangerous rocks that might pierce the hull.

His crew were on edge and Finlain shared their unease. The red sky above Vault's Anvil bled into the clouds like a bloodstain and

the air had a foulness to it that was more than simply the sulphurous reek of the volcano.

‘I’ll be glad when we reach the beach for the night,’ said Meruval, moving from the gunwale to stand next to his captain.

Finlain nodded, peering through the purple dusk towards the other vessels in his command. *Glory of Eataine* was riding a little low in the water and *Asuryan’s Fire* lagged behind, her captain keeping a little too much distance between his ship and her sister vessels.

‘Indeed,’ said Finlain. ‘The sea has an ill-aspect to it this evening.’

Meruval followed his captain’s gaze and nodded in agreement. ‘I know. I’ve had to steer us around rock formations I’ve never seen before. It’s worse than sailing east of Yvresse.’

‘Have you known this stretch of water to be this inconsistent before?’

‘Not in my memory,’ said Meruval, ‘but in my grandfather’s time, he spoke of Tiranoc rising to the surface with great heaves that threw up bleak islands that sank almost as soon as they breached the surface.’

‘As though the land sought to return to the light.’

‘Something like that, yes. He said that when Vaul was angry, he would strike his anvil and the land around would heave with fire and earthquakes.’

Finlain glanced over his shoulder at the smoking peak of Vaul’s Anvil and sent a quick prayer to the smith god that he would spare them such anger this night, since the light was fading fast and a brooding fog was rapidly closing in. Strange noises and flickering lights danced at the edge of perception, and though such things were not unheard of in the magical mists that obscured the isle of Ulthuan from predatory eyes, they were still unsettling.

Only the keen hearing of his crew and the mage sight of Daelis would see them safely to the shoreline and the feeling that he could do nothing more was anathema to him.

No sooner had he thought of the mage than his sonorous voice sounded from the prow.

‘Captain! Land ahead, we must slow our progress.’

‘Hold us here!’ ordered Finlain, gripping the smooth timbers of the gunwale as the vessel came to a smooth halt.

‘Come on,’ he said and set off towards the mage, not waiting to see if Meruval followed him or not. He marched down the length of the ship, passing sailors eager to be on dry land for the evening. The ship was allowing the current to carry her to the shore, the crew ready to make any adjustments necessary to keep them on course.

‘Almost at the beach,’ he said as he passed the crew, radiating a confidence he did not yet feel. He climbed the curved steps to the elaborate eagle prow and the mage who guided them slowly through the mist.

Daelis sat rigid on his chair, his cream and sapphire robes glittering with magical hoarfrost and a soft glow limning the edges of his eyes.

Without looking up, the mage said, ‘We are close to land, captain. The shore is less than two boat lengths away.’

The mage’s voice was distant, as though he spoke from within a great, echoing cave and Finlain could feel the ripple of magic work its way up his spine, a fleeting image of a dark, undersea world flickering behind his eyes.

‘Two boat lengths?’ said Meruval. ‘Impossible. We haven’t sailed far enough to be that close to land. You are mistaken.’

Daelis inclined his head towards the navigator, but did not open his eyes. ‘I am not.’

‘Captain,’ said Meruval, indignant that his piloting skills were being called into question, ‘we cannot be that close. He must be wrong.’

Finlain had sailed with both Daelis and Meruval for long enough to know that both were highly skilled at what they did and he trusted their judgment implicitly. However, in this case, one of them had to be wrong.

‘I’m telling you, captain,’ said Meruval. ‘We can’t be that close to the shore.’

‘I believe you, my friend, but what if Daelis is correct also?’

‘I am correct,’ said Daelis, lifting his arm and pointing into the mist. ‘Look.’

Finlain followed the mage’s outstretched hand and narrowed his eyes as he sought to identify what he was being shown. Scraps of mist floated like gossamer thin cloth and at first he was inclined to agree with Meruval that the mage was mistaken, but as the wisps of fog parted for a moment, he caught sight of a towering wall of glistening black rock rearing up before his ship.

Meruval saw it too and said, ‘Isha preserve me if he wasn’t right after all...’

‘You said it yourself, Meruval, the sea was unsettled this night.’

‘You have my humble apology, captain,’ said his navigator. ‘As do you, Mage Daelis.’

The mage smiled and Finlain shook his head as he marched back to his crew and issued the orders that would see them sail along the cliff until they reached a bay with a beach large enough to land all three ships.

‘Guide us along the coast, Meruval,’ said Finlain as a sudden whipcrack sound echoed behind him, followed by a trio of rapid thuds. He turned in surprise, seeing bright red runnels of blood streaming down the white back of the mage’s chair and the barbed points of three crossbow bolts of dark iron that had punched through his chest.

Daelis gurgled in pain, pinned to his prow chair by the bolts, and it took a second for Captain Finlain to realise what had happened. He looked out into the mist, knowing now that Meruval had been right after all, they hadn’t been close to land, and that great black cliff was not part of Ulthuan at all... it was...

The mists parted as a great crack of groaning rock echoed from the murky depths and the mighty cliff seemed to twist and rise from the ocean. Seawater poured from fanged portals and great idols of armoured warriors carved into the rock as they rose from the sea and a great beacon of flame bloomed high above him.

‘To arms!’ shouted Finlain, as a flurry of dark crossbow bolts flashed through the air from somewhere high above him. Screams tore the air as many found homes in elven flesh and the stink of

blood filled his senses. He staggered as a bolt tore across the side of his calf and embedded itself in the deck. He gritted his teeth against the pain, blood pooling in his boot, and looked up as a great flaming missile arced from the black cliff to engulf the *Glory of Eataine*. Her sail erupted in fire and flaming brands scattered all across her deck.

Its deception unmasked by the attack, the tall cliff of sheer rock cast off its mantle of poisonous mist and Finlain was rooted to the spot in terror as he saw the monstrous, unbelievable size of their attacker.

No mere ship was this, but a mountainous castle of incredible bulk set adrift on the sea and kept afloat by the most powerful enchantments. One of the dreaded Black Arks of the dark elves, this was a sinister floating fortress, tower upon tower and spire upon spire of living rock that had been sundered from the isle of Ulthuan over five thousand years ago.

Crewed by an entire army of deadly corsairs and dismal home to thousands of slaves, the Black Arks were the most feared sea-going vessels in the world and dwarfed even the might of Finlain's Eagle ships. Finlain had heard it said that the bulk they displayed above the surface of the water was but a fraction of their true size, with great vaulted caverns below the waterline that were home to terrible monsters, slaves and all manner of foul witchcraft.

Even as he recognised the identity of their attackers, a brazen gate of rusted iron shrieked open in the side of the ark and a long boarding ramp crashed down over the gunwale, jagged spikes splintering the deck and wedging it fast into its prey.

Finlain pushed himself to his feet and swept his sword from its sheath, a glittering silver steel blade forged by his father and enchanted by the archmages of Hoeth.

Dark shapes gathered in the shadow of the gateway in the rock and a volley of white-shafted arrows slashed past Finlain's head to fell them with lethal accuracy. Another volley followed within seconds of the first and this time it was their enemies that were screaming.

He threw a glance over his shoulder to see that Meruval had formed several ranks of archers, their bone-white bows loosing arrow after arrow into the dark portal.

In answer, a scything spray of crossbow bolts spat from the mouth of the ark and Finlain heard the screams of his warriors as they died in the fusillade. Elven archers were the best in the world, but even they could not compete with the rate of fire the infernal weapons of their enemies could manage.

Keeping low, Finlain darted forwards as the deadly crossbow bolts thinned the defending elves long enough for the boarders to dash across the lowered ramp. Screaming druchii corsairs clad in dark robes and swathed in glittering cloaks formed from overlapping scales charged from the depths of the Ark, their twin swords gleaming red in the ruddy glow of Vault's Anvil.

Finlain rose to meet them, his sword slashing through the first warrior's neck and pitching him into the sea. He stabbed the next enemy warrior through the groin and desperately blocked a deadly riposte to his own neck. It had been many years since Finlain had fought the dark kin of his race, slender ivory-skinned elves with long hair the colour of night. Their faces were twisted in hatred and their movements as swift and deadly as his own.

So like us... he thought sadly as he parried another blow and despatched his foe with a roll of his wrist that plunged the tip of his blade through the corsair's eye and into his brain. Blue-fletched arrows flashed past his head and sent more druchii screaming into the sea, most passing less than a foot from Finlain's head, but he feared no injury from his own warriors.

Another blade joined his and he smiled in welcome to see Meruval, armed with his twin, moonlight-bladed swords leap into the fray. With the aid of his faithful navigator, he was finally able to take more stock of the battle and risked glances left and right to see how the other ships in his command fared.

Glory of Eataine burned from stem to stern and Finlain knew she was lost. *Asuryan's Fire* was invisible in the dark and mist, but he feared the worst as he heard the raucous victory chants of the druchii and the screams of the dying.

Only *Finubar's Pride* fought on and he knew they had to break the hold the Black Ark had on them if they were to stand any chance of survival. Finlain stepped back from the desperate fighting and shouted, 'Meruval! Can you hold them?'

The navigator plunged his blades into the chest of a druchii warrior and kicked another into the sea, spinning on his heel and opening the belly of a third.

'For a time,' he said, as a pair of iron bolts smacked into the deck beside him.

Finlain nodded and limped away from the desperate fight, shouting, 'Axes! Bring up axes, we need to cut ourselves free!'

Fire erupted from nearby and his heart sank as he saw *Glory of Eataine* break apart and sink beneath the waves along with her crew.

Finlain vowed that such would not be their fate...

'MY LADY,' SAID THE warrior in the tall helm who carried a long, leaf-bladed spear. 'It is getting late and we should be heading back to the villa.'

Kyrielle Greenkin smiled as she heard the note of exasperation in the warrior's voice and put on her best pouting expression of innocence. Her auburn hair was woven in long plaits, held tight to her skull by silver cord that framed a beautiful face with shimmering jade eyes and a full-lipped mouth that could charm even the hardest heart.

A simple warrior had no chance.

'Not yet, silly,' she said, and there was beguiling magic in her voice. 'It is in the gloaming that some of the most wondrous plants flower. You wouldn't want me to return without something wondrous to present to my father, would you?'

The warrior glanced helplessly at his comrade, pinned like a butterfly by her captivating gaze and knowing he could not deny her, even had he desired to.

'No, my lady,' he said, defeated.

It was unfair of her to use magic on the guards her father had provided her with, but she had not lied when she spoke of the beauty of the night blooming flowers; the pearl-leafed Torrelain, the

singing blooms of the magical Anurion (named for her father and its creator) and the beautifully aromatic Moon Rose.

She picked her way down the cliff top path that led to the beach, one guard before her and another behind as they made their way down to the shore. Kyrielle went barefoot, her keen eyes easily picking out sharp rocks and thorny brush before they could injure her.

Her long dress was fashioned from green silk and clung seductively to her slender form, its fabric woven with looping anthemion patterns. In one hand she carried a delicate reticule of tightly woven cloth and in the other a small knife with a silver blade – for night blooms should only ever be pruned with a silver blade.

The scent of the night filled her senses and she could smell the perfumes of the local flora as well as the powerful fragrances dragged from the depths of the ocean and borne upon the air. When the shifting isles on the eastern coast of Ulthuan renewed themselves, the darkness of the deep sea was disturbed and all manner of strange plant life was washed ashore as well as unknown aromas that scented the night air – the chief reason her father had sited one of his terraced garden-villas on this largely deserted peninsula of rock on the coast of Yvresse.

The pale crescent of the rising moon bathed the beach in ghostly radiance and turned the white cliffs into softly glowing walls of light as the surf crashed against them further out to sea and the waves rolled up the sand with soft sighs.

She loved this time of night, often seeking the peace and tranquillity that the sound of the waves brought her. To be out on a night like this, with the evening blooms spreading their petals and the light of the moon caressing her skin was heaven for Kyrielle, a time where she could forget the troubles of the world around her and simply enjoy its beauty.

‘Isn’t this magical?’ she asked as she danced onto the beach, pirouetting beneath the moon like one of the naked dancers at the court of the Everqueen. Neither of the guards answered her, both aware when her questions were rhetorical. She laughed and ran down the beach along the line of the cliffs with long, graceful

strides. Even this high on the beach, the sand was wet beneath her feet and she knew that the shifting isles must have undergone a violent transformation indeed to stir the oceans this strongly.

She stopped beside a particularly vivid Moon Rose, its petals slowly uncurling to reveal its romantically dark interior. The dusky scent of the plant sent a shiver of pleasure through her and she reached down to snip one of the pollen-producing anther before placing it in her reticule.

The soft clink of armour announced the arrival of her bodyguards, their armour slowing their pace and she laughed as she imagined their consternation as she had run down the beach and left them in her wake. She moved on, taking cuttings from a dozen different plants before she stiffened as she caught the bitter scent of something else, something that didn't belong.

'Can you smell that?' she asked, turning to her guards.

'Smell what, my lady?' replied the guard she had bewitched on the way down to the shore.

'Blood,' she said.

'Blood? Are you sure that's what you smell, my lady? Might it not be some kind of flower?'

She shook her head. 'No, silly. You're right that there are some plants that carry the scent of blood, but none that are native to Ulthuan. The druchii ferment a brew called blood wine and the vine the grapes come from is said to smell like congealed blood, but that's not what this is.'

At the mention of the druchii, both guards moved to stand beside her, their movements tense and martial as Kyrielle sampled the air once more and said, 'Yes, very definitely blood.'

Without waiting for her guards to follow her, she set off towards the shoreline where the waves tumbled to the sand in cursive lines of foam. She skipped lightly across the sand, leaving almost no marks where she trod as she followed the scent of blood across the beach.

Kyrielle halted as she saw the figure at the water's edge, lying spread-eagled on his back and looking for all the world like a corpse. 'There!' she said, pointing towards the body. 'I told you I could smell blood.'

Before she could set off once more, the nearest guard said, 'Wait here, my lady. Please.'

Reluctantly she acceded to the warrior's request; after all, there *was* a chance that this person might still be dangerous. Nevertheless, she followed behind the two guards as they cautiously advanced towards the body. As she drew nearer, she saw that it was a young and handsome elf dressed in a torn tunic of the Lothorn Sea Guard. Even from behind her guards, she could see the slight rise and fall of his chest.

'He's alive,' she said, stepping towards him.

'Don't, my lady,' said one guard as the other knelt beside the figure and checked him for weapons. She watched as he removed the figure's cracked leather belt, upon which hung a knife sheathed in a metal scabbard of black and gold, and passed it back to his comrade.

'He's alive all right.'

'Well, I told you that already,' said Kyrielle, pushing past the guard now holding the knife belt to kneel beside the unconscious elf. His hands were torn open and there was a nasty gash on his forehead, but he was breathing and that was something. His lips were moving as though he muttered to himself and she lowered her head to better hear what he was saying.

'Be careful, my lady!' said her guard.

She ignored his warning and held her ear to the young elf's mouth as he continued to whisper faintly.

'...must... told... I need... tell... Teclis. Needs to know... Teclis!'

'Please, my lady!' said her guard, 'We don't know who he is.'

'Don't be silly,' said Kyrielle, lifting her head from the unconscious figure's fevered ramblings. 'He's clearly one of our people, isn't he? Look!'

'We don't know anything about him. Who knows where he came from?'

Kyrielle sighed. 'Honestly! Look at his tunic. Whoever he is, he's clearly come from Lothorn. Obviously his ship sank and he was able to swim ashore.'

‘I’ve never heard of any Lothorn ships falling foul of the Shifting Isles,’ said one guard. ‘Certainly not one of Lord Aislin’s.’

‘Lord Aislin?’ said Kyrielle. ‘How do you know he is one of Lord Aislin’s sailors?’

The guard pointed to the partially obscured eagle claw emblem on the figure’s tunic and said, ‘That’s Lord Aislin’s family symbol.’

‘Well that settles it then,’ said Kyrielle. ‘It’s our duty to help him. Come on, lift him up and carry him back to the villa. My father will be able to help him.’

Seeing no other choice, the guards knelt beside the supine figure, hooked his arms over their shoulders and lifted him between them.

Kyrielle followed them as they carried him from the beach, smiling happily at this mystery that had washed up on her doorstep.

CAPTAIN FINLAIN AND three of his crew who had loosed all their arrows fought their way through the hail of iron bolts back towards the prow of *Finubar’s Pride*, each warrior bearing a long-hafted shore axe. Searing tongues of magical flame streaked the dark sky, but none came near Finlain’s ship, the arcing missiles all slamming into the hull of *Asuryan’s Fire* and punishing her terribly.

A desperate exchange of arrows and crossbow bolts slashed back and forth between his ship and unseen enemies concealed high on the jagged, rocky battlements of the Black Ark, his warriors forced to conserve their arrows until their keen eyes spotted a definite kill shot. The druchii showed no such restraint and showered the deck of the *Pride* with deadly bolts at will, such that her deck and the roofs of her cabins resembled the hide of a porcupine.

The sporadically lit darkness and swirling smoke from the burning wreckage of the *Glory of Eataine* that still floated hampered the druchii marksmen and Finlain used its cover to move towards the sound of shouting and clashing blades, where Meruval fought the corsairs trying to board his ship.

Blood streamed from numerous cuts on Meruval’s arms and chest and Finlain wondered how he could still be fighting, such was the amount of red on his tunic. Meruval fought with speed and grace, his pale blades killing with every stroke. Finlain wanted to

shout to him, but knew that to break his concentration would be fatal. Instead, he turned to the warriors who accompanied him and said, 'That boarding ramp is embedded in the deck and gunwale, so you need to cut it free. Go, and no matter what happens, don't stop until it's done. Understood?'

Their grim expressions was all the answer he needed and Finlain simply nodded and said, 'Asuryan be with you.'

The four of them rose from their cover and charged towards Meruval, Finlain lagging behind as the wound in his calf flared painfully. One of the axemen was immediately pierced through the top of the skull by a crossbow bolt and fell to the deck, but the others reached the side of the ship and swung their axes in great overhead sweeps. Finely crafted timber splintered under their blades and Finlain winced at the damage being done to his faithful vessel, even as he knew it was necessary to save her.

Finlain swung his own blade at a corsair readying a killing blow against Meruval, but the blade slid across the warrior's scale cloak without penetrating. The druchii spun to face him and slashed with a pair of wickedly curved daggers that dripped black venom. Finlain ducked under the first dagger and blocked the second, hammering his fist into the corsair's jaw and pitching him from the ramp.

'Withdraw!' shouted Finlain and Meruval stepped back from the fight as the captain of *Finubar's Pride* took his place at the head of the ramp. More bolts thudded around him, but he paid them no mind as he raised his sword to meet a fresh wave of corsairs. Before they charged, he turned to Meruval and said, 'When the ramp is cut free, get us out of here!'

Meruval nodded, too breathless and exhausted to speak, and staggered back along the deck. Finlain returned his attention to the approaching corsairs and bellowed a cry of defiance as they came at him with their cruel eyes and deadly blades.

He fought in a trance, his sword moving as though of its own accord as it opened throats and bellies with each graceful cut. He felt blades cut his own flesh, but he felt no pain as he killed his dark kin with relentless precision.

Dimly he could hear their screams of pain and hatred, mingled with the solid chopping of axe blades, but everything felt muted, as though the battle were being fought underwater. A druchii blade seemed to float past his head as he turned it aside then brought the blade back in a decapitating sweep. From the corner of his eye, he saw a cloaked warrior thrusting with a long, dark-bladed sword, his green eyes bright with centuries of malice, and knew he would not be able to block the strike.

Even as he realised that this was the blow that would kill him, the boarding ramp lurched as his axemen finally chopped it free of the deck. The druchii on the ramp staggered and the green-eyed swordsman slipped as the ground slid out from beneath him. Finlain plunged his bloody sword between the corsair's ribs and kicked him from the ramp.

'Captain!' cried one of the axemen. 'We're free!'

Finlain took a backwards step and shouted, 'Meruval! Now!'

No sooner had the words left his mouth than *Finubar's Pride* surged back from the Black Ark. With nothing to support it, the boarding ramp tipped a dozen druchii corsairs into the churning sea as it fell against the side of the cliff with a resounding clang of metal.

Finlain lowered his sword and placed a steady hand on the torn sides of his ship as a wave of pain and dizziness threatened to overcome him. More of his warriors rushed to help the ship into getting as much distance between them and the Black Ark as possible. He let out a deep breath and turned to the breathless axemen. 'Well done,' he said, as the great, dark cliff began to recede, the Eagle ship's superior speed and manoeuvrability getting her clear with great rapidity. 'You saved the ship.'

Both warriors bowed at the captain's compliment as Meruval bellowed orders to get the sails raised.

As the mist closed in around them, Finlain knew that they were by no means out of danger. He made his way along the length of the deck, offering words of praise and congratulations to his warriors until he reached Meruval, who sat slumped beside at the stern at the tiller.

‘The others?’ said Meruval.

‘Lost. I saw *Glory of Eataine* sink and heard nothing but slaughter from *Asuryan’s Fire*. I fear that only we escaped, my friend.’

‘We’re not clear yet, captain,’ said Meruval.

‘No,’ agreed Finlain. ‘I know nothing of how quickly a Black Ark can get underway, but I do not plan on waiting to find out. Get us to Lothorn by the swiftest route and then have those wounds seen to. We have to take word to Lord Aislin that a Black Ark sails the waters of Ulthuan.’

‘How in the name of Isha did a Black Ark get this far south?’ said Meruval.

‘I don’t know,’ said Finlain. ‘But there’s only one reason for it to be here.’

‘And what’s that?’

Finlain gripped his sword tightly. ‘Invasion.’

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