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DEFENDERS OF ULTHUAN

Graham McNeill

The high elves have long been the protectors of the Warhammer World, and their homeland of Ulthuan is known for the powerful magic that surrounds it. At the heart of Ulthuan lies a magical vortex, and the mages who created it remain trapped in a space out of time, endlessly working the spell that keeps the world from becoming a seething Realm of Chaos. When Ulthuan comes under attack from the forces of Chaos and dark elves led by the Witch King and the hag sorceress, Morathi, the high elves must hold firm or face disastrous consequences.

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. Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels 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.

Join the ranks of the 4th Company at

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‘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 metal 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.