

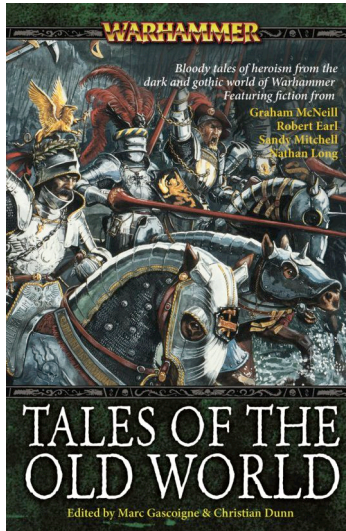
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The following is an excerpt from *Tales of the Old World*.

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## From FREEDOM'S HOME OR GLORY'S GRAVE, by Graham McNeill

SATISFIED HIS SQUIRE understood the threat before them, Leofric once again advanced on the door. Light streamed from the windows and at the threshold, but it was a dead light now, bereft of warmth or sustenance. He could feel it calling to him, bidding him enter with promises of comfort and an easement of burdens, but knowing it for the lie it was, the illusory light had no power over him.

He reached out to grip the black ring that opened the door, and was not surprised when it turned easily beneath his hand. Cold, glittering light enveloped him as the door swung open with a grinding squeal of rusted hinges and he felt its attraction grow in power as he saw what lay within the keep.

Where he had expected emptiness and desolation, instead there was life and people. The great hall stretched out before him, its tables groaning with wild meats and fruit of all descriptions. Earthenware jugs overflowed with wine and a colourful jester capered madly in the centre of the chamber, juggling squawking chickens. Children played 'smell the gauntlet', a game banned in Bretonnia after it had incited a peasant revolt, and a laughing nobleman clapped enthusiastically to a badly played lute. Above the nobleman, Leofric saw a stuffed stag's head, its antlers drooping and

sad, and shook his head at the idea of risking his and Havelock's life for such a tawdry prize.

Leofric took a step inside, wary at the sight of so many apparitions and forced himself to remember that they were not real. Lord d'Epee had only mentioned one creature, calling it a Dereliche, a spectral horror that sucked the very life from a person with its deathly touch. He had said nothing about a host of creatures...

The revellers appeared to ignore him, but having attended the court of the king and been on the receiving end of courtly snobbery, Leofric recognised their studied disinterest as false. Whoever or whatever these ghostly people were, they knew he was there.

'Lord d'Epee didn't say nothing about a party,' whispered Havelock.

'No,' said Leofric grimly, 'he didn't.'

Each of the revellers glimmered with a sheen of silken frost and Leofric approached the nearest, a man dressed in the garb of a minor noble, his clothes bright and well cut, though of a fashion even Leofric knew had passed out of favour many hundreds of years ago.

Leofric slowly extended his sword arm towards the apparition, the blade white in the reflected light of the hall. The tip of the sword passed into the outline of the man, and it had penetrated barely a fingerbreadth when the man hissed and leapt away, the guise of humanity falling from his features in a heartbeat.

Instantly, the gaudy banquet vanished and Leofric was plunged into utter darkness. A low moaning soughed on the cold, dry air and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the sound. He heard Havelock cry out in fear and spun around, trying to pinpoint the sound of the moaning voice.

'Havelock!' commanded Leofric. 'Where are you?'

'Right here, my lord!' shouted Havelock, though Leofric could see nothing in the blackness.

'Find a wall and get to the door, I don't want to hit you by mistake!'

'Yes, my lord,' replied Havelock.

Leofric blinked and rubbed a hand across his eyes as he attempted to penetrate the gloom. He turned quickly on the spot,

keeping his sword extended before him until his eyes could adjust. He heard a hissing behind him and spun to face it, but another sound came to him from behind and he realised he was surrounded by a host of creatures that were as insubstantial as mist.

He cried out as something cold brushed against the skin of his back, flinching in sudden pain and surprise. His flesh burned as though with frostbite, but he could tell his armour was still whole. Whatever powers these creatures possessed was such that his armour was useless and he cursed d'Epee for sending them on this fool's errand. He remembered the same deathly chill touch when shadow creatures of the dark fay had attacked him when he had journeyed to the lair of the dragon, Beithir-Seun. Cu-Sith had saved him then, but the Wardancer was long dead and Leofric was on his own now.

Another cold touch stole into his flesh from the side, but he was ready this time and swept his sword down and the white blade cut through something wispy and soft like wadded cheesecloth. A sparkle of light fell to the stone floor like a rain of diamond dust and Leofric heard a shriek torn from what sounded like a dozen throats simultaneously.

'So you can be hurt?' taunted Leofric as he heard a chorus of hisses drawing nearer.

'Yes, we can,' said a sibilant voice that came from many places, 'but your flesh is ours, your spirit is ours...'

He could see the faint outlines of perhaps a dozen figures drifting towards him, their outlines blurred and indistinct, but that was enough. Ever since his time in Athel Loren, his sight had been keener and he had been sensitive to the proximity of magic in the air. He narrowed his eyes, letting his awareness of the approaching creatures steal over him like a warm blanket.

'Come on...' he whispered as he saw they all moved in perfect concert, as though they were but fragments of a whole... as though orchestrated by a single will.

He could see that the apparitions were unaware that he could see them in the darkness and continued turning blindly to maintain the deception.

You're not the only ones who have the power of illusion, he thought.

When the nearest creature was an arm's length from him, Leofric lunged, spearing it with the point of his sword. The multitude cried out in pain as it vanished in a puff of light, but by then Leofric was amongst them, his sword slashing left and right and destroying each creature it cut into. Shrieks and wails of pain filled the hall and Leofric saw the apparitions whip through the air like smoke in a storm.

'Now, Havelock!' shouted Leofric.

Once again the rusted hinges squealed as Havelock threw open the door to the banqueting hall and bright moonlight streamed inside. Further illuminated by the light of the night sky, the apparition was bathed in white; its spectral outline limned in glittering light as its ghostly avatars returned to it and became part of the whole once more.

So this was a Dereliche, thought Leofric. Its features were twisted in hatred as its form grew in power, though Leofric knew he must have hurt it with those he had destroyed.

With a shriek of rage, the Dereliche hurled itself forward, its arms extended and ending in ghostly talons that reached for his heart. Its speed was astonishing, but Leofric had been expecting its attack and twisted out of its reach and swung his sword for its head.

His blade cut into the monster and he felt its rage as the Blade of Midnight burned its ethereal body with its keen edge. The Dereliche spun behind him and its claws raked deep into his side as it passed and Leofric cried out in pain as he felt his strength flow from his body and into his foe.

'Your strength fills me, knight!' laughed the Dereliche. 'I will feast well on you.'

Manic laughter followed him as Leofric spun to face his foe once more, launching a deadly riposte to its body. The sword sailed past the creature and it darted in again with a predatory hiss of hunger.

The Blade of Midnight snapped up and Leofric shouted, 'Lady guide my arm!' as he leapt towards the Dereliche and felt the blade pierce its unnatural flesh.

It shrieked in agony as the magical blade of the elves dealt it a dreadful wound, the powerful enchantments breaking its hold on the mortal realm. Even as it wailed and spat in its dissolution, Leofric spun his sword until it was held, point down, before him. He dropped to one knee and whispered his thanks to the Lady of the Lake.

‘She will not save you!’ hissed the Dereliche. ‘You are already marked for death, Leofric Carrard.’

Leofric’s eyes snapped open and he saw the fading form of the Dereliche as it sank slowly to the stone floor of the chamber, its form wavering and fading with each passing second.

‘How do you know my name?’ demanded Leofric.

The Dereliche gave a gurgling chuckle and said, ‘The Red Duke will rise again in Châlons and his blade will drink deeply of your blood. The realm of the dead already knows your name.’

Leofric rose to his feet and advanced on the creature, but before he could demand further explanation, its form faded completely until only a dimming shower of sparkling light remained.

With the Dereliche’s destruction, the last vestiges of the hall’s illusion fell away and Leofric saw it for the faded, forgotten place it truly was. Neglect and despair hung over everything and the wan moonlight only served to highlight the melancholic air of decay.

He looked up and saw that the stag’s head was still there, looking even more pathetic than it had before, its fur fallen out in clumps and one antler broken. Havelock moved to stand beside him and followed his gaze.

‘Looks like he’s seen better days, my lord.’

‘Haven’t we all?’ said Leofric, sheathing his sword and turning from the stag, his thoughts dark and filled with foreboding.

## From ROTTEN FRUIT, by Nathan Long

REINER LED FRANKA quietly through the dark hallways and twisting stairs of the silent castle until he found the musicians' gallery above the main hall. He pulled her in and crushed her to him, kissing her passionately. She resisted at first, surprised, but after a moment the tension went out of her arms and her lips parted. They melted into each other, as if the boundaries between them were blurring. Franka moaned in her throat and her hands ran down Reiner's back. Reiner gripped her hips and pulled her into him.

'Wait.' Franka was suddenly pushing back, her hands on his chest.

'Wait?' asked Reiner, baffled. 'Why?'

'My lord, please. I cannot.'

'You cannot? But you just did!'

'You surprised me. But we must not continue.'

Reiner's brow furrowed. 'But then why did you come away with me? Why...?'

'I came so that we might speak of... all this.'

'Speak? You want to waste these few precious moments we have speaking?'

'Hist!' said Franka, turning. 'I heard a noise.'

'None of your tricks,' said Reiner, but now he heard it too: a shuffling and bumping. He and Franka stepped to the lattice.

Moving somnolently through the great hall below, dressed only in his night shirt, was Udo. His eyes were open but he moved through the room like a blind man pulled by some invisible rope.

'He sleepwalks,' murmured Reiner.

'We should make sure he doesn't do himself a mischief,' whispered Franka, and turned towards the door.

'But...' Reiner sighed. She was already in the hall. He followed.

As they started down the stairs to the hall, they saw Udo coming up. They backed around a corner until he topped the stairs and walked away down the hall.



They started after him. Reiner cursed. He had felt Franka's desire. It would only have been a matter of time before she succumbed. Now who knew when they could come to grips again.

Udo turned a corner. When Reiner and Franka reached it, Franka peeked around, then pulled quickly back.

'What is it?' asked Reiner.

'A... a woman,' said Franka, frowning.

'What?' Reiner eased his head around the corner.

At the end of a short hallway, open doors revealed a scene from some old romantic painting – a couple embracing on an ivy-covered balcony, the lovers haloed softly in the moonlight – except in the painting, the man would undoubtedly have worn breeches.

The woman was shockingly beautiful, a voluptuous succubus in a plum velvet dress, with glossy black hair and a full-lipped, heart-shaped face. Udo was fully under her spell, trying to close with her like a lust-crazed schoolboy while she held him off.

'Later, beloved,' she was saying. 'We must speak of other things first.'

The scene felt familiar, but Reiner was so beglamoured by the woman's beauty he couldn't remember why.

A hand pulled him roughly back. 'Do you want them to see you?' hissed Franka.

'I was, er, well...'

Franka rolled her eyes.

The woman's voice floated around the corner: a throaty contralto. 'No, beloved. First you must tell me what was said at dinner. Why is Valdenheim here? Does he mean to destroy us?'

Reiner and Franka froze at the mention of Manfred's name.

'Dinner be damned,' whined Udo. 'You don't understand how much I need you. I ache for you.'

'I know exactly how much you need me, silly boy. Now tell me or I shall leave.'

Udo yelped. 'No! You mustn't! I will tell! Though they said little enough. Father begged Valdenheim for help fighting the "horror" in the forest, but Valdenheim put him off, saying the Empire hasn't the resources.'

‘So he hasn’t come to hunt us down?’

‘No. He’s only passing through. Taking spies to be questioned in Altdorf, he said.’

Reiner and Franka heard the woman’s relieved sigh. ‘Very good. Now did you tell your father of the white stag as I asked? Has he agreed to the hunt?’

‘I told him, but... but, beloved, is it really necessary to kill him?’

‘He will never consent to our union, my sweet. Or to the kingdom of pleasure we hope to found here. It is best...’ She stopped suddenly, then murmured something Reiner and Franka couldn’t hear.

‘What?’ said Udo loudly. ‘Overheard?’

Reiner and Franka began backing hastily away, but before they could take three steps Udo was around the corner, swinging his fists wildly. ‘Assassins!’ he cried. ‘Spies!’

‘Hush, beloved!’ hissed the woman, following him. ‘You’ll wake the house.’

Reiner and Franka dropped Udo with a few well-placed fists and knees, and he rolled away, groaning. The woman was another matter. She flashed towards them like an oiled shadow, stiletto glinting in her hand. Reiner and Franka dropped their hands to their belts, forgetting again that they had no daggers.

The woman lunged at Reiner, her blade seeking his neck. He grabbed her wrist, trying to force it back. It was like trying to bend iron. He looked in her eyes. They shone with a weird light. His mind began to swim. Franka kicked the woman in the stomach. The beauty snarled and backhanded her, breaking eye-contact with Reiner. Franka flew back, head bouncing off the wall, and she slid to the floor.

Reiner caught the woman’s arm as she stabbed again, this time averting his eyes, but even using his whole body to hold the stiletto away, still it inched towards his neck.

Sounds of doors opening echoed down the hall.

‘Unhand her, villain!’ cried Udo, staggering up. Franka grabbed his legs. He kicked her in the face.

‘Idiot child!’ hissed the beauty. ‘Be silent!’

Udo pummelled Reiner. His blows were weak, but a lucky punch to the kidney made Reiner's knees buckle and the witch's stiletto jerked forward, gashing his collar bone.

With a look of triumph, she ripped her arm free of Reiner's grip and raised the stiletto, but feet were running towards them and they heard the scrape of unsheathing swords. The beauty looked up, cursing. Reiner kicked her in the stomach. She stumbled back, eyes flashing angrily at Udo. 'Fool! I told you to be silent.' With a frustrated hiss, she ran to the balcony and leapt over. Reiner half expected her to fly away like some bird of prey, but she dropped out of sight and was gone.

Udo's fist caught Reiner on the cheekbone. 'Spoilsport! You've chased her away!'

Reiner ducked back and grabbed Udo's arms. Franka lurched up and caught Udo's collar from behind, pulling his shirt down over his shoulders to trap his arms. Reiner was about to head butt the youth when he saw a livid mark on Udo's exposed chest. A small puncture wound, purple-black with infection, rose directly over his heart. It looked like a third nipple.

## From A CHOICE OF HATREDS, by CL Werner

WITH AN ANIMAL CRY, Reinhardt crashed through the window, broken glass and splintered wood flying across the room. Landing on his feet, the sword at his side was in his hand in less than a heartbeat. To his credit, the witch hunter reacted swiftly, kicking the small table at Reinhardt an instant after he landed in the room while diving in the opposite direction to gain the pistols and longsword that lay upon the bed. But Reinhardt had the speed of youth and the martial training of one who might have been a captain in the Reiksguard on his side. More, he had purpose.

The witch hunter's claw-like hand closed around the grip of his pistol just as cold steel touched his throat. There was a brief pause as Thulmann regarded the blade poised at his neck before releasing his weapon and holding his hands up in surrender. Both arms raised above his head, Mathias Thulmann faced the man with a sword at his throat.

'I fear that you will not find much gold,' Mathias said, his voice low and unafraid.

'You do not remember me, do you?' Reinhardt snarled. 'Or are you going to pretend that your name is not Mathias Thulmann, Templar of Sigmar, witch hunter?'

'That is indeed my name, and my trade,' replied Mathias, his voice unchanged.

'My name is Reinhardt von Lichtberg,' spat the other, pressing the tip of his blade into Mathias's throat until a bead of crimson slid down the steel. 'I am the man who is going to kill you.'

'To avenge your lost love?' the witch hunter mused, a touch of pity seeming to enter his voice. 'You should thank me for restoring her soul to the light of Sigmar.'

'Thank you?' Reinhardt bellowed incredulously. The youth fought to keep himself from driving his sword through the witch hunter's flesh. 'Thank you for imprisoning us, torturing us? Thank you for burning Mina at the stake? Thank you for destroying the only thing that made my life worth living?' Reinhardt clenched his

fist against the wave of rage that pounded through his body. He shook his head from side to side.

‘We were to be married,’ the nobleman stated. ‘I was to serve the Emperor in his Reiksguard and win glory and fame. Then I would return and she would be waiting for me to make her my wife.’ Reinhardt pulled a fat skinning knife from a sheath on his belt. ‘You took that from me. You took it all away.’ Reinhardt let the light play across the knife in his left hand as he rolled his wrist back and forth. The witch hunter continued to watch him, his eyes hooded, his face betraying no fear or even concern. Reinhardt noted the man’s seeming indifference to his fate.

‘You will scream,’ he swore. ‘Before I let you die, Sigmar himself will hear your screams.’

The hand with the knife moved toward the witch hunter’s body... And for the second time that evening, Mathias Thulmann had unexpected visitors.

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