



GRIMDARK FUTURE

A CHANCE AT REDEMPTION



SHORT STORY

A Chance at Redemption BY RYKER SMITH

After the battle, the Lust Daemons gathered; their ranks were battered and far fewer than they had been that morning. Kissknell looked over her battered companions. They had fought well against the Blessed Sisters, but they had still been defeated; there had been weaknesses in their formations, tactics and martial skills that their foes had exploited.

Such imperfection could not be tolerated. Lust Daemons knew that their weakness must be cut away.

Kissknell stood defiantly before the army that she had only recently fought alongside. Some of her fellow Lust Warriors stood beside her, their tails flicking with anxiety.

They had been brought to the ruins of the battle, the last remnants of their now abandoned home, to face judgement.

Their leader stepped forward as the sun set, prepared to pass her judgement upon the survivors.

"You have been judged wanting. Our perfection is tainted by your presence." The Champion looked over them with contempt, "Your are to be purged."

"My blades danced upon our foes' flesh until the retreat was called. Your judgement is in error." One Warrior hissed.

"The life of any who dares purge me is forfeit." Another called out.

"It has been decided that some among you may yet have uses, however. So, I offer you a chance at redemption; find the weak among your ranks and purge them," the Champion continued, unbothered by voiced objections. "We shall return at the next sunset; if I find the results to our satisfaction, I shall welcome the survivors back to our fold. Else, we shall turn our blades upon you."

Kissknell looked at the ranks around her. Many had served with her among the scouting parties, sent to ambush and delay the Blessed Sister's advance. She had judged that they fought admirably, but perhaps their Champion sought even more time or hoped that they would do more. Yet, it was not their place to force back the entire Human advance.

It was, Kissknell narrowed her eyes, the main force who had failed them. She had fought hard to delay the advance, but relief came too late and broke too quickly. The Lust Champion now sought to deflect the blame which lay with her by laying it at the feet of those who had been isolated from the rest of the forces.

She gritted her teeth and coiled her scaled tail tight. Of course, she dared not say this out loud. Such an accusation of weakness might drive the Champion to make an example of her or even order a total purge of their ranks.

The rest of the group were equally quiet as many looked to each other, dumbfounded, the idea of their imperfection obviously new to them as well.

In the silence, the Champion turned back and commanded her forces to follow, soon fading into the horizon.

For a moment, the only sound was the dusty grey wind beginning to pick up. Eventually, panicked whispers broke the silence, wondering what to do.

Kissknell looked around nervously. The verdict passed offered them a chance at redemption, but the price was blood; those around her who she had held as her fellow condemned only moments ago now looked upon each other as potential prey. If there was to be a culling, who was to make the first move?

She could see eyes darting around, waiting for someone to risk taking the initiative. A winged figure walked purposefully to the front of the group. Kissknell recognised the Lust Fury as Jadehew.

"The answer is simple," Jadehew said, her arm blades drawn, but unthreatening at her side. "We allow the cowards among us their own chance at redemption: to face a quick death with honour, rather than forcing us to go to the trouble of hunting them."

A smile twitched from Jadehew's lips. "If they do not step forward themselves, then the strongest among us shall choose them."

Kissknell didn't move. She looked over the crowd with uncertainty. More seemed to share the same expression of nervous hesitation.

Jadehew nodded in understanding. "We have been given a command to purge our weakness. I offer a chance to make the knife your friend rather than your enemy; recognise your weakness and step forward for your own sake."

Murmurs fell over the crowd. Kissknell looked expectantly over the crowd to see if any would step forward. It seemed as though Jadehew's pleas fell on deaf ears until a Lust Daemon a few steps away from Kissknell slithered forward.

"No." Kissknell retorted loud enough for the crowd to hear.

The Lust Daemon stopped and looked back, but Kissknell lifted her eyes to meet Jadehew's.

"I do not recognise you, Warrior, what is your name?" Jadehew glared down at Kissknell.

"Kissknell."

"Why do you speak to save one so weak that they would offer themselves readily to our blades?" Jadehew said, spitting.

"The fault does not lie with those brave enough to face death. The poison lies with those who passed this sentence upon us, eager to spare themselves blame." She said through clenched teeth.

She dared not glance away even for a moment from the glare of the Lust Fury before her, but she heard whispers behind her; a mix of anger, fear and nervous agreement.

"You imply the poison is nearer to the heart than the limb?" Jadehew smirked, stepping her toward Kissknell with her taloned feet. "Our leaders, who were chosen for their perfection?"

"Poison can infect the heart as readily as any limb," Kissknell replied, "Those who return to the fold may simply doom themselves to future failures by following the commands of an imperfect Champion."

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"Ah, such venom." Jadehew said, addressing the crowd. "The Champion judged right, it seems; a dangerous poison flows through our veins, which doubts the guidance of our leaders and weakens the whole. It will be an honour to dispatch you."

"Will you die with your honour then?" Kissknell gasped, the blade cutting into her neck. "If they leave you here among the ruins or send you out again to another failed ambush?"

As she spoke, a low rumbling echo sounded out through the area. The battle had kicked loose sand and debris, and now the winds began to shift, picking them up in the distance.

Gasps of fear began to spread among the crowd as the cloud in the distance grew into a tsunami of pale dust. Soon, the horizon was blanketed in dark grey.

Jadehew sneered, pulling back. "A storm comes. Let this be the first step of cull; those too slow to find refuge shall find death instead. Kissknell, we shall settle this later."

Kissknell didn't wait for another opportunity. Slithering quickly on her serpentine lower body, she rushed to find shelter among the pillars and rubble that she had once called home.

Manoeuvring over fallen wreckage, she searched for a place where she could protect herself from the dust and sand in the rapidly increasing winds.

They eventually found a large crack in the ground that ran underneath a toppled building. They climbed inside and underneath the building, just as the wall of sand and dust hit.

The wind was loud, and some particles still reached them, but they were safe enough under their impromptu shelter.

"Has everyone found refuge?" Kissknell called out in the dark space, very little light refracting through the crevice now.

"Many have, Kissknell," a voice responded, "but we are scattered. Some shadowed Jadehew, following her lead elsewhere."

Kissknell looked around, blinking her eyes to adjust to the dark. There was just enough light that Kissknell recognised the speaker to be the Lust Daemon who had stepped forward to volunteer.

"You speak my name, yet you have not given your own." Kissknell said, settling in amongst the rocks. Judging by the size and strength of the sandstorm, they were going to be there awhile.

"I am called Baskthief." She responded but did not make eye contact. "I was among the first to fight and the only one of my band to survive because I fled the fight."

"Is that why you wished to sacrifice yourself?"

"I know my weakness, my cowardice. I do not wish for death, but I will not be an object of pity or a burden to my people. I have failed, so let someone better take my place."

"Wasted blood. One who faces death so fearlessly is no coward."

"It is my blood to waste," Baskthief spat back, "I did not ask for your pity."

Kissknell went silent, not sure how to respond. Few among her people would speak so plainly of their own weakness.

With dust and debris still blowing in from the opening, Kissknell searched for something to seal the entranceway.

"Do doubts of failure not plague your mind as well? Are you so certain of your own perfection?" Baskthief asked. Her tone was gentle, not accusatory.

"The greater fault would be surrendering to despair while there is still a chance at life. Yet, even if we return to the fold, I fear our lives will be squandered by the weakness of our leaders."

"Then what would you do?"

Kissknell nodded, locating a large stone. She gestured for other close Lust Daemons to help her.

"We must forge our own path. Once we leave these ruins behind us, we may seek out a new band or create a new one. First, however, we must survive."

Kissknell grunted as she and two other Lust Daemons lifted the stone, pushing it to the opening. It wasn't perfect, but it kept the winds and debris from whipping into the building.

Kissknell concluded, "If we turn our blades upon each other, our chances will be greatly diminished."

Many of the Daemons within the ruined space were listening. Even in the darkness, Kissknell could see them nodding.

"It is a far more uncertain future," Baskthief said, "The wastes reach far, and there is no band waiting to accept us. Such a plan might only see us condemned to wander aimlessly into death. I fear more will see wisdom in Jadehew's words."

"I shall treat with Jadehew," Kissknell hissed, "But for now, our duty is rest. Tiredness dulls the mind and body, and we must be sharp if we wish to live."

Some among their group lay down upon the stone, but Kissknell could see eyes darting around in the shadows. If they did not begin the cull soon, they would be exiles among the wastes. The Champion's promise was an enticing one, and it would only take a single traitor for their tentative alliance to collapse.

Eventually, the Daemons split apart, withdrawing into the dark for privacy as they rested. Kissknell knew that this peace would be short-lived, but she hoped that the rest might lend her some clarity of mind as they waited for the storm to pass.

Then, there was a scream. The Daemons hurried out of their holes to find a slim crack of early morning twilight seeping in from the stone which had blocked the entrance before; the sun had not yet risen.

Near the stone lay the bloodied corpse of a Lust Daemon underneath. One large gash lined her neck and upper torso. Blood was still pooling beneath it.

"Was this one of ours?" Baskthief asked.

Kissknell looked over to the other stunned expressions in their group, seeing no one missing.

"Show us your weapons."

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The Daemons held out their weapons, blades and claws alike. Not one was stained with blood.

Kissknell nodded as she thought. “Jadehew, or another, found their way here. They hoped to plant the poison of mistrust among us and fled.”

The rest of the group looked at each other uneasily. Kissknell’s sounded reasonable, but few could set aside the possibility of an assassin among them.

A silence weighed over the group for a long moment, until a voice rang into the ruin from outside.

“Kissknell!” She heard Jadehew’s voice echo through the crevice from above. “Let us continue where we left off.”

Kissknell readied her swords and climbed out of the crevice, the other Daemons following close behind.

Jadehew had not come alone. She had with her another band of Daemons who had followed her through the storm. Some had the same bloodthirst that she saw in Jadehew’s eyes. Yet, in others she could see doubt. If there was doubt, there was still a chance.

The two bands stood across from each other, ready for bloodshed, but the words spoken here could still shape the outcome. Kissknell still hoped that wisdom might prevail.

“There is no cause for this violence, Jadehew.” Kissknell called out, seeing her and her group gathered near the entrance.

“I have come to carry out the verdict placed upon us,” Jadehew spoke, “There can be no other outcome.”

Kissknell scowled, but she could sense doubt in the others who stood behind her.

“Redemption still lies within reach. We have found the poison that tainted our ranks.” Jadehew then addressed those who stood behind Kissknell, “Stand by our sides in purging the doubters, and then perhaps you shall be spared.”

Kissknell felt a hand on her back, turning to see Baskthief.

“Perhaps she has reason,” she said, tentatively. “If the only way forward is to shed blood, it may be better to do so fairly and with wisdom rather than killing each other in battle.”

“If our people return to welcome us to the fold,” Kissknell responded, addressing everyone, “I put no faith in a Champion who would pass such a verdict upon us. Our hope of surviving is far greater if we stand together.”

“Lies!” Jadehew yelled, getting impatient. “She wishes to lead you away from the path of redemption! Do not listen to her poison, or you too will have to be culled.”

Kissknell watched as some passed her, scuttling to Jadehew’s side. The two bands were roughly equal in number, fighting out in the open among the pillars.

Jadehew stepped forward again, smiling with satisfaction, as the others began to approach. Behind her, Kissknell heard her own band preparing to fight back.

Kissknell backed up. *No, this isn’t right!* she thought. They weren’t only fighting for nothing; they were playing right into the hands of those that placed her here.

Before she could speak another word, Jadehew leapt forward with her blades in the air. Kissknell raised her swords to block the blow, but Baskthief sprang to tackle her aside.

The fight had begun. Daemons from both sides rushed to join the fray, as Furies hovered above, trading blows in the sky.

She watched on in horrified silence as she saw her hopes come undone. As she looked on, she saw a blur in the corner of her eye; one of Jadehew’s followers struck at her with a blade.

Kissknell parried the blow and turned to face her attacker.

“Listen to me!” She hissed. “Stop fighting! We must work together if we are to have any hope of survival!”

The attacker cared little for words but instead struck at her again.

Kissknell managed to weave to the side, slashing the attacker with her tail to catch them off guard. She moved behind them and saw them begin to move to attack; there was no time to ask for surrender. She brought down her left blade, slashing it across the attacker’s back.

It was happening again. The same mistake that led to their loss the day before will lead to their deaths again: putting their trust in an unfit and bloodthirsty leader.

Perhaps that is our imperfection, she thought. *Misplaced trust.*

Kissknell slithered away from the unfolding melee, but a Daemon pursued her, spear readied. She let her reflexes do the work; she used one blade to parry her foe’s thrust and then a quick slash with her right-hand sword. Lost in her own thoughts, Kissknell’s watched as the life drained from her foe.

Perhaps they were doomed by their imperfection. The cull was merely a way to speed their inevitable demise. The thoughts raced through Kissknell’s mind. *She had given them so many chances, but they had chosen to doom themselves.*

Kissknell could not dwell long in her thoughts, however, before another Lust Warrior charged at her. She readied her blades, watching her foe approach with practised skill. She readied herself to spring as she watched a Lust Fury swoop down and slice the approaching Lust Warrior’s neck with her talons.

The Fury didn’t even pause before flying up again, seemingly taking no note of Kissknell’s presence. Seeing the chaos unfolding before her, she began to climb for a pillar. Her serpentine tail allowed her to slither up along its coarse surface.

She watched the battle below as her people slaughtered each other with choreographed precision.

Already, many of them were dead. It was a slaughter to which rivalled and perhaps even surpassed what they faced at the hands of their Human foes.

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Their speed and skill were beyond reproach, and yet, they had turned upon each other so readily for fear that any of them might be deemed unworthy.

For the first time, she felt a twang of pity for her people. This bloodthirst and willingness to turn upon their own was surely the greatest flaw she had ever seen.

In the heart of the fight, she saw Baskthief standing before Jadehew. The Lust Fury was standing on the ground, clearly exhausted from the fight but unwilling to admit it. Baskthief stood ready with her own blades, but it was clear that her wounds were beginning to take their tolls.

Soon, only Baskthief and Jadehew remained standing, surrounded by the dead and dying.

“Jadehew!” Kissknell called out. “End this senseless fighting.”

Baskthief tilted her head as she saw Kissknell halfway up the pillar as the battle was being waged below.

“My task is nearly done.” Jadehew spat, “I will purge your poison soon enough. We shall be welcomed back into the fold.”

Jadehew swung her arm blades toward Baskthief, pinning one of her swords to the rock and twisting it from her grasp.

“I will take who will follow me and leave this place,” Kissknell said with a snarl. “You only stand to waste the lives and blood of those who follow you.”

“Who will follow you?” Jadehew smiled as she batted Baskthief’s second sword from her other hand. “I have culled so many, and now you ask that I spare the source of the poison!”

Baskthief cried out. “Kissknell! I need your aid!”

Jadehew sliced at her, cutting a wound along her arm and knocking her to the ground.

Kissknell was too far away.

Jadehew dug her clawed feet into Baskthief’s tail, spread her wings, and started flying upward. Baskthief was still gasping for air.

“Baskthief!” Kissknell called out, Baskthief’s torso being dragged across the rubble as Jadehew rose higher.

Kissknell knew what Jadehew was doing. She was going to drop her. And Kissknell had the perfect view.

They rose higher and higher as Kissknell searched desperately for help. But no one else was alive. They were all that remained.

Kissknell looked back up to watch the last of her friends die and caught a glint of metal in the palm of Baskthief’s hand. Her friend had grabbed the tip of a broken spear as she was being dragged on the ground. With all the muscles in her tail, Baskthief coiled tight, bringing her torso and the blade up fast toward Jadehew, shearing a wing off completely.

Jadehew screamed in pain as they careened downward, slamming into another pillar and causing it to fall with them. Dust and rubble burst into the air on impact.

“No!” Kissknell yelled, spiralling back down her own pillar and over to where they crashed. She waved her sword to fan the dust, coughing as she breathed it in.

“Baskthief!...Baskthief!” She called out as the dust settled. A silhouette appeared ahead of her.

“Baskthief? Is that you?” Kissknell hesitated.

There was silence, but she recognised the upright form of Baskthief in front of her and the mangled form of Jadehew on the ground.

“Baskthief!” Kissknell sighed in relief. “Are you badly hurt? Will you be okay?”

“...You really are a coward.”

Kissknell paused. “...What?”

“You...you didn’t fight. You just stood there and watched.”

Baskthief continued.

“No, I was too far...”

“Jadehew was right... I think I understand it now.”

“Baskthief, your thoughts are clouded. Give yourself a moment...”

“You are weak. You left me to die. Did you do the same against those cursed Sisters? Fled at the first sign of danger. You can’t even face your flaws; you just blamed everyone around and led anyone who would follow you astray. You are a poison...”

The heavy dust was completely settled now.

“There is nothing to be gained from this,” Kissknell pleaded, throwing her two swords to the ground. “There has been too much unnecessary killing.”

Baskthief leaned down and picked up Kissknell’s dropped blades. “So, then you are not only a coward...but a fool.”

Kissknell looked into Baskthief’s eyes. There was rage in them.

Baskthief coiled and hissed, raising the swords to either side. Then, she struck.

Now unarmed, Kissknell threw herself to the side, barely dodging the flurry of blades from Baskthief.

What more can I say to calm her? Kissknell desperately thought.

Baskthief continued to strike, Kissknell desperately staying just out of reach.

“I only wished to avoid senseless death; do not let yourself be blinded by Jadehew. There’s still time, we can walk another path and create our own chance at redemption...”

Baskthief took a deep breath. Kissknell looked into her eyes. Kissknell saw a flicker of doubt, and for a moment, she recognised the face of the companion who had trusted in her.

Then, Baskthief exhaled, and her expression hardened. “No. You were the one who blinded me with your lies but no more; I have overcome my imperfections...”

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Without wasting another moment, she thrust forward, driving her shoulder into Kissknell. Kissknell's scales slipped against the dust, and she tumbled into the crevice, hitting her back hard against the sharp rock. She gasped in pain.

Baskthief peered over the edge. "It's over, Kissknell. Surrender yourself and face your end with some honour."

"I am sorry, Baskthief. I tried to save us...all of us." Kissknell said.

She picked herself up and began to slither towards the opening of the building where they had sheltered together from the storm. Memories of hope flooded her mind; she had thought that they might band together to face their fate together.

"As am I, Kissknell." Baskthief said and dove into the crevice, swords raised to deliver the final blow.

Kissknell fell down beside the body of the first of them who had been killed. She looked at the bloodied corpse, imagining the fate that she now faced. She felt the hilt of a sword lying by the corpse prodding into her, and she moved quickly to grab it.

Baskthief threw her full weight into the final attack, hoping to finish Kissknell in a final strike. Kissknell moved quickly, drawing out her hidden blade and catching Baskthief by surprise, as her weight drove the sword deeper.

Kissknell stared into Baskthief's rage-filled eyes, watching as they dulled and her body grew limp. She felt a tear roll down her cheek as her companion died before her.

Carefully, she rolled Baskthief's body off of herself and emerged back to the ruins.

She looked over the area. She was the only one left. The rest lay lifeless among the debris. She alone had survived the culling.

She looked up, past the ruins, to see another dust cloud form on the horizon. It wasn't another storm.

The Champion had kept her promise after all. Or, perhaps, sought to finish off anyone who had been left alive.

It did not matter. She looked out at the carnage before her. The job was finished.

Perhaps, she might have presented herself for redemption. Yet, she had no desire to bow her head and risk facing the same fate once more, an inevitability under a weak and foolish leader.

She turned. No, she would find her own way among the wastes.

