



# GRIMDARK FUTURE

## BURIED HOPES



SHORT STORY



# BURIED HOPES BY BROOKE STEMME

"It has to be here somewhere," Onmudus muttered. "I just don't know where."

The Oracle leaned over a table, papers strewn across its surface. Each one told a different story of the landscape and history of the planet Tiodonon. The maps from the Elven period depicted ancient cities and outposts. They leaned more toward artistry than functionality. Sketches of architecture and landmarks were emphasised, a wave of emotion washing over Onmudus as he ran his finger gently over the images. It was not quite nostalgia. He wasn't here back when it was Elven territory, but the maps depict a landscape that had changed drastically since they were drawn.

Pieces of their history were recorded on these ancient maps.

Dust and wind had taken their toll over the years. What survived nature's constant pressures was repurposed by the occupancy of the Robot Legion. Glorious cities and structures created by Elven hands, now a husk of their original glory. The thought turned Onmudus' feelings sour. Still, revenge wasn't why he had come.

Onmudus turned his attention toward the newer, hastily sketched maps from scouts tracking the Robot Legion's movements. Each time he believed he would be able to predict their path, something caused them to change direction. It made his job more challenging. Most days he wouldn't mind, but the frustration clung heavier to him this time. There was more at stake.

Lying open nearby was a book with faded ink, its pages yellow and worn. Onmudus never imagined a shipping record would be of much use. But while the Robot Legion's targets were unknown to him, he knew exactly what he was seeking.

A dream had come to Onmudus in the previous weeks. At the time it had been vivid, calling him to seek out a tome upon the lost Elven world of Tiodonon. This tome would be a gift that would set his Fleet upon a new path. These visions promised hope to the Oracle, a rare commodity among his people after over a century and a half of exile among the stars.

Yet, making sense of the vision had proven difficult; he'd spent weeks combing through the fleet's archives, trying to make sense of it. Its intensity had yet to wear off, and little remained now but his notes. Yet, from them, he was able to find what he was looking for: the Tome of Guidonuan.

It was a treatise documenting a number of psychic practices, many of which were now lost. It was last recorded on the desert world of Tiodonon, in transit between cities. On paper, it sounded like a simple search and retrieval mission. In practice, the arid planet's sandy surface was more challenging to traverse than he expected. Not to mention the activities of the Robot Legion.

Still, it wasn't only the pursuit of psychic knowledge that drove Onmudus' search for the tome. Intuition gnawed at the edges of his thoughts. The tome was concrete, something he could decipher from his vision with knowledge.

But there was something else.

Onmudus could feel the importance of the dream weighing upon him, but his notes gave him little more than the book itself. Perhaps he could guide his people in a new direction, but the details felt vague, even to him. If only he had a more tangible lead...

"Onmudus."

The Oracle looked up to see the Ancient Commander peering over the table as the wind gently ruffled the maps.

Onmudus bowed his head, then met the Commander's gaze. "Vuinenalos. I didn't expect to see you this early in the morning."

The Commander nodded curtly, though he looked past Onmudus.

"I don't believe the Robot Legion ever sleeps," he said. "If they did, it would make predicting their next moves easier. We might have intercepted them by now."

"It surprises me that they've pursued us here," Onmudus replied. "Their Technomancers would have little to gain from the tome; Guidonuan spoke of how to channel psychic potential; it would do little for their nanobots. Still, if we are wise, we may be able to avoid their attention; it would not be wise to confront them in their own territory."

The Commander frowned, making little attempt to hide the distaste in his tone.

"It wasn't always theirs," he muttered. "Our people walked these lands first."

Onmudus kept his thoughts to himself. He might not disagree with the Commander, but there was more to be discussed than the past. There was still a tome to find; he did not yet know how, but Onmudus knew it would be a catalyst.

"If our scouts are correct, the Robots are moving in a search grid," the Oracle said. "If you follow the edge of this crater, you may be able to..." He outlined a section of the map past the last recorded location of the Legion in comparison to their own search grid.

"Onmudus," Vuinenalos said, interrupting the Oracle's focus. "I need your assurance that it's still out there. I trust your visions, but our fleet can't be sustained on promises alone."

Though it remained unsaid, Onmudus could finish the Commander's thread of reasoning. If he, as the Oracle, was responsible for this outing and had nothing to show for it, it would be a mark of humiliation for both of them. Onmudus curbed his harsher retorts, though a hint of frustration was evident in his response.

"It's still out there," he said. "I can point our Strikers in a few directions, but we need more time..."

"Time is not on our side," Vuinenalos snapped. "The Robots are out here too; if they've realised the wealth of ancient treasures buried beneath their feet, there will be little hope of recovering anything. If this book is as important as you make it out to be..."

"It is," Onmudus said, interrupting as politely as possible. "I am certain of it."



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The Commander sighed, shaking his head. "Apologies, Oracle," Vuinenalos said. "I'm a soldier, above all. I only wish to ensure that we win today's battles so we can live long enough to see the future that you have envisioned for us. What course would you suggest we set today?"

Before Onmudus could answer, a low hum filled the air. Three dust clouds approached the two Elf leaders at a breakneck speed. Onmudus had just enough time to throw a thick cloth over the maps and reference documents. Three jet bikes skidded to a halt, spraying the table, the Oracle, and the Commander in a haze of dust as they braked abruptly.

Vuinenalos was the first to speak, dusting himself off aggressively. "How many times must I remind you all of the proper way..."

The Elf on the jet bike interrupted, her machine still running.

"My apologies, but I believe urgency takes precedence over protocols in such situations, Commander," she said, gripping the handles of her bike tightly. "The Robot Legion army have changed direction from their predicted path; I believe it is because they found something."

"Are you certain?" the Commander asked him. "Do you think it was the relic that we've been searching for here?"

"I saw a crater with an Elven vehicle; it wasn't one of ours," she said. "I can't say anything more for certain, but it's far more of a lead than anyone has reported in days."

Onmudus' heart raced. If the Robot Legion found the Tome of Guidonuan, they needed to act quickly. If their foes did manage to claim the book, it was very possible that the knowledge would be forever lost to the Elves.

The Ancient Commander seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"How many?" Vuinenalos asked.

The Jet Bike Striker shook her head. "I believe they have brought the majority of their forces to bear."

Vuinenalos nodded.

"It's a risk we'll have to take, but if you managed to avoid detection, then we may be able to make those odds a little more manageable. We strike first. Speed is to our advantage. Our primary goal is to prevent them from claiming the tome."

The Jet Bikes revved, then sped away, carrying commands throughout the camp.

A few minutes later, Onmudus could hear the sounds of Elven ships taking flight. The Oracle was determined to stand with his people as they confronted these Robots and reclaim the prize of their ancestors; this was their land, after all.

"Onmudus, stay close to me," Vuinenalos said. "I will need your wisdom and your strength, whatever lies ahead of us."

"Very well," Onmudus said, bowing his head slightly. "I shall follow your lead."

Onmudus left the table covered with cloth, its clues and mysteries hidden under it just as they were scattered across Tiodonon's surface. His hope would be to unlock one more mystery, but it was still too soon to tell what he would find.

The tome would have to wait.

All too soon, he was able to see the Robots stationed in the distance. He felt the Anti-Gravity APC come to a stop as Vuinenalos unloaded and ordered his retinue to do the same.

The prospect of battle didn't send a thrill through Onmudus as it seemed to for Vuinenalos. All he could feel was a sense of duty. He was exactly where he was needed. The rest of the High Elf Fleet were in position as well, stationed as directed in order to lay a trap for their enemy.

A battle like this could destroy many more relics which still lay hidden beneath the sands, especially if the Robots were ready to excavate here. There was doubtless knowledge and technology that would be lost to them forever. But Vuinenalos' conviction also inspired Onmudus forward; they had lost this planet to the Robot Legion once before. They would not lose it again.

His dream flashed through his mind, fragments and pieces that he was still trying to understand. He felt a moment of doubt, uncertain whether he had truly understood his own vision. Yet, the belief that it could mean victory over the Robot Legion was too tempting to argue against in his mind.

The first shot fired did not come from the ground but from the air. Elven ships shot down at the approaching Robot Legion, prompting a return volley. Little did the Robot Legion know it was a distraction.

Jet Bike Strikers sped out from their hiding places, covered in dust, to strike at the flanks of the Robot Legion's formation. It divided their attention, the Robot Warriors closest to the outside focusing their attention on the bikes while the High Elf Fleet rained down shots from above. Speed was their strength; if they could keep the Robots lagging behind, then the battle was as good as theirs.

Vuinenalos commanded the surrounding Protectors to fire. The Elves moved back, trying to lure the Robots closer, who advanced at a steady pace.

It was a dangerous dance, closing in quick then backing off just as fast before the Robots could react. Like Vuinenalos said, they needed to use their speed to their advantage if they were going to even the odds.

Soon enough though, the Robots managed to steady themselves, relying on the longer range of their weapons as their steady advance pushed the Elves back.

In the distance, Vuinenalos and Onmudus could see a large crater; this was likely what the scout had reported. It lay slightly to the flank in the centre of the two clashing forces.

Onmudus hesitated, but Vuinenalos did not; he raised his axe, signalling the Protectors forward as Onmudus pointed after him, directing others to follow him.



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Hurrying so that he would not be left behind, Onmudus channelled his psychic might to cloud the sensors of his foes, hiding his allies from their attacks. It was a simple spell, but it bought them a modicum of safety as they rushed towards their foes.

Then, just as they reached the edge of the crater, a deafening explosion echoed out.

Onmudus tried to throw himself down into cover, but it was too late. The shockwave launched him forward into the crater, sending him tumbling down as well as his staff. The pain dulled his mind; Onmudus did all he could to simply avoid blacking out into unconsciousness.

"Onmudus!"

It was Vuinenalos' voice; the Ancient Commander was sliding down along the edge of the crater. Vuinenalos grabbed the Oracle's arm, saving him from a freefall. Yet, his weight had been just enough to unbalance his saviour, and soon both of them were rolling down the hill.

Onmudus felt himself impact the sand several times until at last he came to a halt, striking the bottom of the crater.

His head was spinning. He was still breathing. He could still move his hands and his feet, though not without discomfort. When his vision settled, he found Vuinenalos already testing the slope, leaping up and trying to find purchase with feline-like agility.

"We can make it back up if we put some effort into it," Vuinenalos said calmly, "There's no time to waste."

Onmudus considered pointing out his own injured yet alive state but thought better of it. He looked out across the crater, more dust falling down as figures above continued the battle. It created the sensation of walking through a dream.

The atmosphere made Onmudus think maybe he was dreaming. Across the crater, half-buried in rubble, was an ancient elven vehicle. Though the metal was warped, the elements having taken their toll, Onmudus could recognise it as a transport vehicle often used by libraries.

This might be what both forces had come here searching for.

"Wait," Onmudus said. "I just need a minute. This could be it."

Onmudus' intuition once again rose within him, a curiosity that would not allow him to ignore it. He approached the ancient elven vehicle, Vuinenalos close behind him. Dust settled over his armour, and he brushed it away from his eyes. He dared to allow a flicker of hope to propel him forward, despite the pain in his body. His might be the hands to uncover the purpose of his vision.

It was Vuinenalos who saw the pair of glowing cyan eyes in the vehicle's shadow.

The Ancient Commander shot first. Onmudus jumped at the unexpected sound. The rocks next to the Robot's head exploded, more dust coating the side of the Robot's face and body.

"Show yourself," the Commander said. "Or I'll shoot to kill."

The cyan eyes flickered. The Robot staggered forward a step, revealed from the shadows.

The Robot Overseer looked badly shredded. He dragged one leg behind him, drawing a line in the dirt. One arm was held closely across his chest, presumably covering a wound.

Onmudus held up his hand, signalling the Commander to hold his fire.

"What are you looking for here?" the Oracle said. His thoughts raced, trying to figure out all the possible ways this interaction could go.

A large boom sounded in the distance, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Neither Onmudus nor the Robot looked away from each other.

"Finish me, Elf," the Robot said. His voice was scratchy, but still understandable. He swayed slightly, as if all the damage caused him to be unsteady. Onmudus could only compare it to seeing Elves beginning to lose too much blood.

Vuinenalos spoke under his breath, but Onmudus pretended not to hear him. He did not believe rash action was the best course of action here.

He needed the Ancient Commander to trust his approach.

"The battlefield is up there," Onmudus said, nodding his chin up toward the lip of the crater. "I'll only draw my weapon if I need to. But you didn't answer my question. What are you looking for down here?"

The Robot hesitated before answering, a different tone to his voice when answering. "A friend."

"There are more of these machines?" the Ancient Commander said.

"It's only the two of us. We fell here after a Burst Mortar struck near our position... The rest didn't make it, but I heard him call out for me as we fell. Now, I fear he has been buried under the sands," the Robot said.

Vuinenalos' gun remained pointed at the Robot's chest, his eyes scanning the shadows. Onmudus knew him well enough to see just the slightest change in this conversation, and he would pull the trigger. But something caused Onmudus to pause. There was no indication this Robot was lying to him.

Onmudus had experience with Elven warriors with a lost look on their faces trying to find a fallen comrade. Though the lack of facial expression made it challenging to tell, he wanted to believe the Robot was telling the truth.

"Tell me... what is your name?" Onmudus asked.

"What are you doing?" the Commander whispered in his ear, but Onmudus ignored him.

"CR3, Creed," the Robot said. "What do they call you?"

"Onmudus."

"Oracle." CR3 said. "What does the future hold? Shall I see my friend again?"



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Onmudus wasn't prepared for that question. A hint of sorrow tinged the Overseer's voice, no fear or hesitation as the Robot's eyes met his. CR3 may not survive the day given his injuries, but Onmudus had no way to say for sure.

It would be easy for Onmudus to see the dying Robot as an enemy or even a mere obstacle standing between himself and the ruins he may have been searching for all this time. But the only way through would involve the Ancient Commander pulling his trigger to ensure the search perimeter was clear.

"What are you waiting for?" Vuinenalos grunted. "Do you know how many lives we have sacrificed for your visions? Surely, you don't intend to throw away everything for the sake of a broken machine."

Onmudus took a deep breath, steadying himself. To turn around, sparing the Robot would risk losing the vehicle forever, rendering everything sacrificed on the way in vain.

"Our people once saw these Robots as mere machines, Vuinenalos," the Oracle said, "This mistake cost us our homes. All that we have left is our honour; I will not sacrifice that to make the same mistake again."

CR3 looked up curiously. His metal face was expressionless, but Onmudus thought he saw some defiance in his cyan eyes; he was ready to face death with a bravery that the Oracle could not help but find admirable.

"CR3 is under my protection," Onmudus spoke sternly to Vuinenalos, who maintained a stony composure.

The Oracle stepped forward towards CR3; Onmudus slowly raised his hands to his neck.

"Keep searching for your friend," the Oracle said. "Until you find him, accept this gift."

His fingers hooked around the metal chain around his neck, pulling it slowly over his head.

In an outstretched hand, he let the necklace dangle.

This was all he had to offer, besides his weapon and his robes.

"If you show it, no Elf should harm you," Onmudus said, ignoring the whispered opinions Vuinenalos offered from behind him. "It is a symbol of my family, a gift passed down through my bloodline for generations. It will keep you, and perhaps your friend, safe."

"I do not wish for your treasures," CR3 looked at the necklace a moment, hesitating, "Besides, your people may just think that I killed you and took it."

Onmudus nodded. "The sight of my family's crest will give them pause at least; any Elf here shall know the symbol and not wish to harm one close to me. Then all you must say is that it was given to you freely by Onmudus, your friend. If you had simply killed me, you would not know my name."

It was a strange gesture, Onmudus thought, but one he felt honour bound to make. His people knew loss well, and he had seen the toll of burying unresolved grief before.

The Robot warrior stood watching him for a moment, then approached. He got just close enough to take the necklace from Onmudus' hand, the metal clinging gently against his palm.

"I will not forget this," CR3 said, studying the necklace. "I have something to offer in return. Not as a trade, but a thank you."

It took all his willpower to remain steady as CR3 struggled with the warped metal in his leg. The Robot's injuries hampered his movement; he was badly in need of repair, yet he turned back and began to dig.

Onmudus approached cautiously, Vuinenalos stepping before him, wary that it might be a trap. Then, CR3 began to dig into the sand.

"When I was searching, I found a tome buried in the sand, with your people's script." The Robot said, "It appears to be undamaged."

Then, there was the sound of metal scraping against metal. The Robot Overseer moved the sand aside and pulled out a box covered in Elven runes. For a moment, CR3 hesitated before holding it up.

Onmudus looked over the box; the symbols along the box labelled it as the Tome of Guidonuan. The precious relic which had guided his dreams and led him to this moment.

Yet, he now felt he knew why he had been brought here. It was not the book itself which held value but the gifting of it. He had not been sure before, but now he knew; he had done exactly what he had needed to do.

"Will you accept it?" CR3's voice pulled Onmudus out of his thoughts and back to the present.

"I will. Thank you," Onmudus said. He took the case from the Robot's hands, holding it close to his robes. CR3 said nothing more, just watched him.

"We must depart," Onmudus said, another large boom shaking the ground. "Or others will come searching for us. I hope that you are able to find your friend."

"Thank you, Onmudus," CR3 said. "I will remember you."

The Oracle couldn't quite place why, but the words seemed to hold significant weight.

"I will remember you, CR3," Onmudus said. The Robot nodded, then turned his back on the Elves and continued his search among the rubble.

Onmudus turned around to find that Vuinenalos no longer had his gun pointed at the Robot, and he did not offer any additional opinions as Onmudus began to leave.

The Ancient Commander stood slightly wide-eyed and with his mouth partly open. He composed himself quickly, easily keeping pace with Onmudus as they began the steep climb up the edge of the crater.

After a few minutes, Vuinenalos spoke again. "I suppose your visions were right."



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Onmudus frowned, following his path up the crater's side. "Right about what?"

The Commander muttered under his breath as he lost his handhold, sending rocks tumbling below him. "The tome really was here, after all."

"You doubted it would be?" Onmudus said, struggling to find his own handholds in the crater's slope.

"I doubted it would be worth the price to find it," Vuinenalos said.

The two of them approached the lip of the crater, the figures of Elves and Robots clearly visible now, both sides locked in battle.

"Later," Onmudus said. "Right now, the Elves need their leader."

Vuinenalos smiled over his shoulder. Then, with a burst of energy, he propelled himself as gracefully as possible up onto Tiodonon's surface once again. His head was raised high, weapons drawn.

"With me!" he shouted, his voice bleeding into the sounds of battle.

Onmudus followed close behind his fellow Elves, locked once again in battle with the Robot Legion. Still, in the back of his mind was a pair of glowing cyan eyes holding what might be the first ripple in a story far larger than Onmudus could imagine.