



GRIMDARK FUTURE

A CHANCE AT GLORY



SHORT STORY

A CHANCE AT GLORY BY RG LONG

The winds howled low across the ruined plain, dragging red dust in slow, spiralling columns through the bones of an ancient battlefield. Jagged pillars rose from the earth between the broken ribs of long-dead titanic creatures which littered the earth. Abandoned bones lay half buried in scorched ash between the rusted out shells of tanks which littered the ground.

A band of War Daemons sat around a blackened crater, the embers of a pitfire smouldering quietly between them. Their eyes burned dimly in the shadows, some with smouldering heat and others with cold light.

At the crater's edge stood Flamebrand, taller than the others, shoulders broad and posture unbowed.

"We've sacked half a dozen outposts," growled a Daemon. "We've nothing to show for it; we cannot boast of great victories over empty tents! They even took their weapons! All they left us are worthless trinkets and baubles!"

Flamebrand barely glanced his way. "It is not surprising. They've learnt to fear us. There is little sport in hunting cowards, but so long as they are trespassing on our world..."

"I would not discount our foe so easily," came the voice of another, Hexmaul, the leader of the Warband. He tossed a shard of gleaming metal into the fire. "There are reasons to run from a fight that are not cowardice."

"I have never known you to run, Hexmaul." Flamebrand laughed.

"The Orcs have come here before, and I have never known them to fear an honourable fight," Hexmaul replied. His voice was tinged with the wisdom of an old veteran, his horns bore chips, and his body bore scars from the many battles he had faced before. "They gather their strength for a fight, and it seems we have failed to stop them. You shall have your great battle."

Flamebrand looked upon his warband's leader with a mix of respect and pity. Time had taught Hexmaul caution, and Daemons rarely boasted of mere survival nor sang songs of the careful. The younger Daemon remained certain that it would be him, not Hexmaul, who would be the subject of song and story, if his overly cautious command would allow it.

He jabbed a thick finger toward the southern ridge, where a line of dust on the horizon suggested movement, vehicles, likely. The ridgeline shimmered with heat, but the smoke from distant fires curled in a lazy plume above it, unmistakable.

The Orcs were out there. Watching.

Flamebrand snorted. "Good. It would be a waste for all of our efforts to be spent chasing cowards."

Hexmaul let silence fall between them. The younger Daemon's eagerness clashed against the older warrior's hard-won patience like steel on stone.

"This world was once theirs, and they remain determined to reclaim it," Hexmaul finally said. "I have the scars to show from their last efforts."

"If we do not fight them at all, then they will take the world anyway." Flamebrand's eyes narrowed as he spoke. "You have the wisdom of a long life, friend, but do you wish to live forever? I wish for glory. Let them come with all of their strength and courage, and war shall determine who shall triumph. Whether we triumph or fall, it should be in a battle worthy of song and story."

"Do not sing your saga before the deed is performed," Hexmaul let out a humourless laugh as he replied. "I have seen many brave souls die unsung."

Flamebrand stepped away. He did not doubt the veteran's wisdom, but he sought a different path. As he moved from the bonfire, he looked over the old battlefield surrounding it. The earth cracked beneath his boots, coughing up thin clouds of ash with every step. It was littered with Orcs and Daemons alike: broken horns and blades, bones of great warbeasts and twisted frames of bikes.

There was a reason that there was such honour at stake in this victory; the Orcs fought hard, with the determination of those seeking to reclaim a lost home and lay their dead to rest. Flamebrand knew this, but his people were no less determined.

This was their home as well.

A sound rippled behind them: footsteps, heavy and deliberate. The Daemons parted as Gorehook, their Champion, approached.

His arrival was like a shadow falling over fire. Skulls hung at his chest: trophies of battles won in flame and blood.

Hexmaul lowered his head, as the other Daemons fell into stillness.

Only Flamebrand met Gorehook's gaze directly.

"Tell me, do you dream of glory?" Gorehook asked, voice like crackling coals.

"I do not dream," Flamebrand answered. "I act."

Gorehook tilted his head. "Good. You have ambition. I give you take the lead of your band; there is a task I would have you perform."

The air thickened around them. Hexmaul's face quivered, but he maintained his expression.

Flamebrand looked down for a moment at his companion. While he was being bestowed a tremendous honour, this was an insult to his companion in equal measure, one which Flamebrand would be eager to avenge if he were to receive it.

Still, Hexmaul remained still.

He stopped before Flamebrand. "The Orcs have abandoned much of the area. They gather around an old spaceport. They may be retreating or gathering strength, but it may also be a trap. Go and gather knowledge; tell me their strength and if they seek to undermine us with some dishonourable tactic."

The younger Daemon stiffened. "You want me to crawl through the shadows? Not leave such work to Hexmaul? I would sooner be where the fighting is thickest."

"Do not make demands of me," Gorehook said sharply. "Do what is asked of you, and one day, you shall have your chance at glory."

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"I will go," Flamebrand said, kneeling. "I will bring you what you seek. I will earn my place."

Gorehook smiled. "Good."

He turned, disappearing into the ruin without another word. The others resumed their tasks, sharpening blades, feeding their Blood Hounds, and muttering prayers to their dying god.

Hexmaul lingered a moment beside Flamebrand.

"You have your chance at glory now," he spoke almost as quietly as a whisper. "Yet, remember, none sing of the fools who throw their lives away."

Flamebrand stood alone then, gazing out toward the ridgeline where the Orcs gathered, shadows against the red sun, just beyond the reach of memory. He tasted ash on the wind. It did not matter how many had tried to reclaim this world before. He would be the one remembered.

He would make them bleed.

The valley where the outpost lay was a graveyard of massive bones, left by great lumbering beasts that had long ago been hunted by Orcs, and then by Daemons, until it met extinction. As the Daemons arrived, it became a site of tribute; skulls of worthy foes were left there as offerings to the God of War. The Orcs sully these grounds with their hastily assembled camp was unforgivable.

The once tranquil grounds now pulsed with noise and motion. Shouts echoed between the tents, and chains were hastily hung up around the bones that jutted from the ground. Torches guttered on poles hammered into the ground cast a faint orange light between the Orc Clan banners and symbols.

From his perch in the ridgeline ruins, Flamebrand watched as Orc Mechanics patched up weathered buggies, bolting spare plates to haphazard frames. Other Marauders dragged fuel barrels into piles, thrown haphazardly between old piles of bones, shouting and laughing as they worked. There were far more of them here than he'd expected.

Flamebrand exhaled slowly, adjusting the grip on his sword.

"They are preparing for a fight," he said, his voice low.

"They're setting down roots," Hexmaul replied, crouching nearby. "This isn't just another raid; it's a staging ground for an invasion."

Flamebrand scanned the camp. The Orcs were no longer the scattered people they once were, clinging to their old sense of pride as warriors. These opponents fought with organisation, intent, and determination.

Then he saw him.

Near the centre of the outpost stood a massive Orc. Two jagged axes rested across his back, holding a banner that he wore on his back. He adorned himself and his standard with teeth, bones, tusks, and other war trophies.

Flamebrand knew a Veteran Leader when he saw one; this foe had felled many before him.

Flamebrand narrowed his eyes, reading their formation and the gesture of the Orc's hand. He was dispatching a strike team, sending them east toward the hills.

Flamebrand grunted at the display.

"They are expecting reinforcements," Hexmaul observed. "This is why they have been retreating; they intend to wait until they are at their full strength before fighting us."

"It sounds like cowardice to me," Flamebrand retorted.

The Orc Leader stood with only a handful of guards at his flank, mere grunts, barely armoured. They leaned lazily against barricades, unaware of the fire building just out of sight.

The battered bones and wreckage surrounding the outpost offered little in the way of cover. Each approach was littered with warped metal, cracked stone, or scorched craters. Flamebrand and Hexmaul moved low, careful to stay within the deeper shadows cast by the rising moon and the occasional flicker of torchlight within the Orc camp.

Flamebrand peered around the bend, watching as two Orc sentries meandered near a scaffold built atop an old ribcage, which stood as tall as a Harbinger. Neither looked particularly alert. They seemed absorbed in their own conversation, laughing as they chatted before turning the corner.

"Weak fools." Flamebrand muttered. "They should be preparing themselves for battle."

"They are confident. A weaker foe would fear us." Hexmaul met his gaze without flinching. "They are stronger than you expect; if you do not learn to respect your foe, you shall not live long enough to hear your saga."

Flamebrand glanced back toward the camp's heart, where the Orc Leader was barking orders to an Orc Mechanic refitting a Truck.

Hexmaul knelt beside Flamebrand. "Do you remember when I first told you this? On the eve of your first battle, you nearly charged before the order was given."

"I remember." Flamebrand replied flatly. "I owe you a debt for your teachings, but don't think you can speak down to me."

"There is a point to my ramblings." Hexmaul shook his head. "We claimed this world in that fight, but they have returned many times since. Even after all of these years, this world is still their home."

The word 'home' stung at him for a moment, though Flamebrand couldn't say why.

The two Daemons crept down the slope, using shattered barricades and broken vehicle husks for cover. They passed the remains of an Orc bike that had been sheared cleanly in two, the front still half-sunk into a pit of hardened glass. Flamebrand touched the metal briefly, then moved on.

The deeper they moved into the outskirts, the more signs of preparation they saw. Fuel lines snaked along the ground in thick, oily trails. They were stacked with spare parts for weapons, vehicles and other necessities.

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Though the Orcs had worked quickly, the presence of the bones and skulls lingered in every corner; it was a reminder that whatever had come before, the world now belonged to War Daemons.

"They are here to *hold the land this time*," Hexmaul said, looking over the outpost. "If they come with all of their numbers, then it shall be years before we drive them out once more."

"Unless we strike fast," Firebrand replied, "If we cut off the head, then their ranks will crumble."

They climbed a steep ledge overlooking the north side of the Orc's camp. From this angle, they could see into the heart of their Orc's position—barely protected, thinly guarded. It seemed most of the heavily armed Veterans and other warriors had been sent away by their Leader to scout the area. The remaining Warriors were younger and inexperienced but walking with a confidence familiar to Firebrand: that of a soldier who had not seen combat.

Then Flamebrand's eyes fell on the fuel barrels. They were piled just outside of a tent near the rear, stacked carelessly behind chains hung between scattered bones which jut from the ground like stakes. Some of these barrels were leaking, besmirching their sacred grounds with vulgar fuel.

Flamebrand stared at it in silence.

"I do not like that look," Hexmaul said.

Flamebrand nodded toward the barrels. "We could light the barrels. A single spark and that side of the camp goes up. It'll isolate their Leader from the rest of the other Orcs."

"You would damage these sacred grounds to trap a foe?" Hexmaul tilted his head.

"They will be destroyed in the coming fight." Flamebrand's eyes didn't leave the target. "But I seek a duel, not a battle."

Hexmaul shook his head. "If you strike recklessly, then you may cost us our chance to strike decisively."

Flamebrand bristled. "If their leader dies, then they will crumble around us and flee, as they have always done before."

Hexmaul folded his arms. His eyes narrowed.

"Do you seek to guide us to victory or merely to earn your own saga? We were told to learn of our foe, not to light the fires of war ourselves. If you fail then..."

Flamebrand turned sharply.

"I was given command; not you." Flamebrand said, as he turned down to look at the Orcs. "This is the moment to strike."

Hexmaul bowed his head. "I still hear in your words the voice of that untested Blood Warrior who sought to charge before the order was given, before the line was ready, but I shall obey."

"Then obey silently," Flamebrand grunted in reply. "I grow tired of your prattle."

Flamebrand led the others around the outpost's edge, skirting low behind the ridgeline. The ground here was cracked and brittle, scorched from old battles. The Daemons moved quickly, crouched low, ducking beneath corroded pipes and slinking between skulls, bones, and forgotten old ruins that predated even the Orcs.

The Orc Warriors seemed to pay little attention, confident that the Veterans and Infiltrators who had been sent to scout ahead would spot any danger. It was almost too easy.

Ash from old battles still clung to the rocks and settled into their joints. The scent of burnt oil lingered in the air. Flamebrand welcomed it; he would bring fire to this place once more.

Then, Flamebrand signalled a stop. He had found the barrels; dozens of them, stacked with only a loose chain to protect them. Some were sealed tight, but others were already leaking, thick trails of fuel staining the ground.

Wordlessly, Flamebrand gave the signal, pouring the fuel along the ground. He moved to ensure that the fire would not merely be an explosion but a wall of flame. The Veterans would rush back once they saw it, and he needed time.

Moving quickly, the Blood Warriors spread the fuel along the ground. Flamebrand sent some back along the route they had taken, saturating the ground around the outpost.

Hexmaul moved deeper into the camp, working to ensure that the fire would spread to the tents there as well.

Flamebrand watched as the others moved; some part of him felt like the Orc Leader must have. His plans were coming together, and just one spark would set the whole place alight.

Then he saw it: an Orc moving towards Hexmaul. A carbine hung from his shoulder as he moved casually, but as soon as he rounded the corner, it would be too late.

Flamebrand looked to Hexmaul, who saw him just in time. Reading his companion's expression, Hexmaul turned and charged at the Orc right as the unsuspecting guard turned the corner.

Hexmaul rammed into the Orc shoulder-first, slamming his foe against the wall. The impact echoed, sharp and sudden.

The Orc screamed in pain, and Hexmaul cut into him, but his shout alerted the camp. Orcs began to swarm, their weapons at the ready. Their Leader stood by the north, far from the commotion, watching for the return of his scouting parties.

Flamebrand stared for a heartbeat, then turned his eyes to the fuel-slicked ground; if he could set the blaze, the Orc Leader would be cut off and isolated. It would be a difficult fight, but he could bring him down.

Then he heard Hexmaul shout, fighting ferociously against the swarming Orc Warriors. Perhaps his sacrifice would truly be worthy of a verse in Flamebrand's saga...

Flamebrand shook his head; he would have to choose between glory and the life of his old friend.

He knew what he had to do, what his god would will. A companion worthy of shedding blood for was worth a thousand hollow words.

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With one sharp strike, he scraped the blade against the oily ground, igniting the blaze.

Flames burst upward, cutting across the camp in a haze of smoke, heat, and fury. Screams erupted from the camp. The fuel barrels behind the wall caught next. An explosion rocked the outpost, throwing Flamebrand forward. Smoke poured across the outpost like a tidal wave.

The Orcs scattered. Shouts became chaos.

Flamebrand moved quickly, his companions hurrying to his side. None of the Blood Warriors spoke a word, but they followed him unflinchingly towards Hexmaul.

As they emerged from the smoke, they walked through the old skulls and bones towards their companion. Hexmaul fought ferociously but evasively, keeping the inexperienced Orcs on their toes and keeping the initiative in his own hands even as their sheer numbers forced him back into the cover of smoke to hide.

Flamebrand's jaw clenched. The firelight reflected in his eyes, flickering with the same hunger that drove him into this pit. Somewhere behind the blaze, his fellow warriors were scattering, moving away from the outpost under cover of smoke.

Flamebrand and his companions turned the tide. With a shout, Flamebrand led the advance. He ran his blade through the first Orc, and the others soon scattered. The few who remained were cut down by his companions.

Yet, as he moved into the fire, he saw only smoke and blinding flame. Hexmaul was nowhere to be found.

He could hear the Orc Leader approaching through the smoke, his voice cutting through the fire like a jagged blade.

"I had expected a better fight from you, Daemons," he bellowed, silhouetted by the burning wreckage. "Where is your honour? Why do you now hide behind smoke and trickery?"

"Show me your blade if you do not fear me," the Orc snarled, turning his head slowly as if scanning the ridgeline. "Come and face me; take your chance for glory!"

Flamebrand said nothing.

He watched from the shadows, unseen, his fingers wrapped tight around the hilt of his sword. The insult didn't sting. It was knowing that he was fleeing when he had come for blood.

In the distance, through the wisps of smoke, he could see the Infiltrators and Veterans rushing back to aid their camp. Staying to fight would merely be throwing his life away. Flamebrand had wanted to prove that he was worthy of song, yet now, he knew the opportunity for victory had passed.

Metal screamed as the flames spread through the scrap and scattered vehicles. Orcs scattered, tearing through their camp to find the ones responsible for the fire.

He had to move now; he could only hope that Hexmaul found his own way out.

Flamebrand stood slowly, his muscles aching. There would be little glory today. Only unfinished business.

He moved carefully across the ridge, stepping over crumbling rock and splintered bones. When he crested the far slope, the noise reached him: close, sharp, and echoing through the valley.

The battle had begun.

Dozens of War Daemons surged across the lower terrain, crashing into the flanks of the retreating Orcs. Blades clanged against flesh. Fire hissed as it licked across bleached bones.

It was not the glorious fight that they had hoped for.

Orcs moved in staggered lines, ducking behind terrain and vehicles to buy time for the others to fall back. Some turned to fight briefly, then melted away again, dragging their wounded or pulling back heavy weapons. One Assault Buggy whipped across the battlefield, swinging its rear tyres in a wide arc that sprayed dust into the Daemons' path, masking the escape of a band of Infiltrators.

The Orcs were bleeding, but they were not broken.

Hexmaul appeared at his side, limping but alive. His body was a patchwork of ash and injuries.

Hexmaul greeted Flamebrand with a faint smile. Flamebrand merely nodded in reply.

The two walked together down the ridge to rejoin their band. Near the base of the valley, the Gorehook stood among fire and ash, surrounded by his favoured warriors. His gaze fixed on the distant line of retreating enemies, watching as the Orc vehicles disappear beyond the far ridge.

Smoke hung in the air as the battlefield grew silent.

"They flee before us," Gorehook said at last. "I had come seeking foes, not prey. Where is the battle that I came for?"

No one answered.

The truth hung in the silence; the fire had broken the Orcs before the fighting began, isolating their Veteran Leader from the fight. Their lines were disrupted. Their fuel stores were lost. Any hope that this might serve as a launching pad had shattered in an instant; gone up in smoke.

Flamebrand stepped forward, streaked with soot. The air felt tight around him, as if the God of War himself was holding his breath.

Gorehook's gaze flicked to him for a moment.

No accusation came. No praise either. Just silence.

The War Daemons regrouped near the base of the slope. The fire continued to burn behind them, consuming what little remained of the Orc stronghold.

Hexmaul sat on a broken barricade, sharpening the edge of his blade with a slow, deliberate motion.

"You should be dead," Hexmaul said at last, not looking up.

"I should have killed him," Flamebrand replied.

"I have no doubt that they would be singing an ode to your glory if they had found your blade embedded in the Orc's chest."

Flamebrand stiffened. "And you would be dead and forgotten."

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Hexmaul stopped sharpening, finally raising his eyes. "Then there would be none left to question each line of your story and note of your song."

Flamebrand bristled but held his tongue.

Hexmaul studied him a moment longer, then returned to his blade.

"You have my thanks, for what it is worth. Besides, it is better to gain victory without losing your life," he said. "If they write my song one day, I hope to hear it."

Flamebrand looked out over the scorched battlefield. The last of the smoke trailed into the sky like a funeral pyre.

"Gorehook shall have a song. I have no doubt of it," Flamebrand muttered. "About how he sent the Orcs to flight without even lifting his blade."

"So long as you draw breath, there shall be more chances. Let Gorehook have his glory; you are the one who has brought us victory. The God of War cares more for courage than song."

They sat in silence again, the wind dragging ash across the stones.

After a long moment, Hexmaul added, "Perhaps one day, I shall be the one who writes your saga."

Flamebrand's gaze remained distant. "You shall have to take greater care of yourself then. I cannot sacrifice every chance at glory for the sake of keeping you alive to tell my tale..."

Hexmaul gave a small, rough laugh.

"We shall see what battles tomorrow brings."

Then he walked into the haze, leaving Flamebrand alone with the smoke, the silence, and the slow understanding of what he had gained and what he had lost.