



GRIMDARK FUTURE

FOOTSTEPS OF THE ANCESTORS



SHORT STORY

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The Battle Truck screeched to a halt over the dunes, rocking them forward. Without a word, Zuzkrask turned and opened the door, taking a deep breath of the dry sandy air and metal. He leapt out, signalling the rest of his band to follow.

Zuzkrask looked out over the plains; his father's father once sang songs of the verdant fields of their ancestors and the massive beasts that roamed them. In these songs, he swore that he would reclaim the world, or his children after him would take up his arms and follow his path.

Zuzkrask's people had sworn the same oath for the span of nearly eight generations now. It mattered not to the Nazragak Clan that the world was scarred, its surface shattered by the old Dwarven machines that had cracked its crust to get to the treasure that lay below. Even if there was little left but bones, memories, and the littered relics left behind by the Dwarves, it was still his people's home, and they would protect it as their ancestors had done.

So, Zuzkrask still fought this ancient war, though the enemies had changed over generations; from Dwarves to Hivers... and now, it seemed, Humans were to be next. Yet, something had changed; since the Humans began to arrive, the cursed old machines had begun to hum.

"The Humans are here." Orthzag, a young Warrior, pointed at a handful of figures in the distance.

Zuzkrask nodded wordlessly as he advanced out to greet them.

"You're trespassing, Human," Zuzkrask called out, his voice low and even. "This ground is ours."

"My name is Andi, and you're in danger." One of the Humans stepped forward, signalling the rest of her squad to lower their weapons. She wore the insignia of an HDF corporal. "The relic that is here is unstable; it needs to be secured."

Zuzkrask looked past her, towards the distant Dwarven tower, which loomed high over the horizon, pulsing and humming with newfound power. "You've awoken the old machine, you fool."

"We're stabilising it," Another Human, seemingly their commander, stepped forward to say, "Let us finish our work, or you won't live long enough to regret it."

"Why should we trust you?" An Orc moved forward to confront him, stepping on something fragile: a pressure plate from the half-unburied defensive array. It clicked once. Then the dirt exploded.

Shrapnel cut through the dry air as the buried mine lit the sky with a burst of kinetic force. The HDF sergeant went down instantly, silenced mid-shout, while the Orc collapsed screaming.

A nod was all the signal that Zuzkrask had to give; the time for diplomacy had passed, and if they did not move first, the Humans would. Two Orcs dropped to the ground and started shooting their pistols. Zuzkrask took the lead, charging headlong through the smoke into the ranks of the HDF soldiers.

Zuzkrask tossed one aside with his forearm, stamping on the soldier's dropped rifle to disarm him as the rest of the Orcs moved around their leader. A second signal, a wave of his hand, told the others what they needed to know; these Humans were more useful as prisoners.

Orthzag looked down, hesitating by a fallen Human soldier; it would mark his first kill.

"Back Orthzag," Zuzkrask responded, there is little honour in shedding the blood of unsuspecting foes."

Orthzag nodded, reluctantly, putting aside his weapon. As he did, the Humans started to run, trying to take advantage of the pause. The Orcs had little trouble, however, pinning down several of them as they fled. The remaining HDF soldiers levelled their weapons, preparing to aim, but Zuzkrask picked up a wounded Human from their scuffle, pointing his weapon towards him.

"I have not fought to kill, Andi. If you pull the trigger, then your comrades are dead. You as well, if you miss."

Zuzkrask was confident that he could bring the survivors down, but allowing them the chance to give up might save the lives of some of his own band of Warriors as well. There was a long pause; Andi and the rest of her squad were hesitant, but they weren't willing to surrender quite yet.

Then, the relic behind them screamed.

A piercing whine tore through the air, a shockwave of heat and static erupting from the relic's core. The ground buckled. A low tremor surged beneath their feet, then a crack, sharp and sudden, split the desert floor. A chunk of the ridge collapsed inward, sending debris, rock, and wreckage tumbling into the new basin.

One of the Orcs was dragged down into the sink by a Human on the ground who had grabbed onto his ankle trying to maintain balance. Their shouts were soon swallowed by dust and noise.

Zuzkrask hit the ground, gripping hard onto his sword as the Human fell down beside him. He felt his ears ringing. All around him was chaos: heat shimmer, wind shear, the sharp tang of ozone and scorched metal. The relic's core pulsed violently now, lighting up the stormclouds rising from the crater. He pushed himself up, blinking grit from his eyes.

A massive shape shifted in the far haze; it was not a part of the relic nor any technology belonging to either the HDF or the Orcs.

It moved again, slow, heavy, and four-legged, with a gait like dragging stone and thunder.

Zuzkrask stepped forward, looking down at the humans. Andi, the soldier from before, looked up at him, blood trailing down from a gash at her temple.

He looked toward the crater, then toward her.

"You woke it," he said flatly.

Andi picked herself up, turning to look at the beast now slowly approaching them.

"We were trying to stop it," Andi replied. She spoke firmly, but there was a tinge of fear in her voice.

"What you wanted to do doesn't matter." Zuzkrask spoke. "If you want to live, then you'll listen now."

They turned together as the remaining members of both squads formed a rough half-circle behind them. Guns ready, each battered and coated in sand.

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The desert didn't care who was right. It only asked who was ready to bleed for the ones still standing.

"Alright," Andi said, "Let's do it."

The remaining members of her squad nodded slowly; four of them stood beside Andi, and another three were still held by the Orcs.

Andi lowered her gun.

"Let them go." Zuzkrask looked over the seven remaining Orcs in his team, and then down to the Human he had been holding at gunpoint only a few moments before. "We will need all the hands we can get."

"What do we need to do?" Andi asked, still hesitant.

"Get the controls," Zuzkrask said. "Then we will figure the rest out."

The crater left by the surge in the old dwarven machine had transformed the area into a fractured bowl of glass-edged ravines and half-buried machinery. Smoke drifted in lazy spirals, occasionally dispersed by wind carrying the smell of scorched wiring. The machine itself, pulsing with unstable energy, glowed at the basin's centre, a dull heartbeat beneath the dust.

Zuzkrask knew the area, even as the ground beneath him twisted with each pulse of the old dwarven machine. The rest of his band were almost as agile, keeping his pace.

The Humans did their best to keep up, following behind the Orcs but maintaining a distance, just in case. Andi was silent as she moved behind him; words were scarcely necessary, as Zuzkrask read her expression as clear as a war banner: she was putting her trust in him, for now, but refused to be caught off guard again.

"Careful. It is a steep drop." Zuzkrask spoke, "We do not need you dead before the Skarthak arrives."

Andi gave a nervous smile, looking towards the creature in the distance. "Skarthak? Is that what it is called? I don't think I've heard of anything like it in our archives."

Zuzkrask gave a mirthless chuckle as he descended towards the tower's base, leaping onto its exposed hull.

"Your people are newcomers, children to the Sirius Sector, treading everywhere that you do not belong," Zuzkrask replied, with a twinge of bitterness in his voice. "What knowledge could your archives possibly hold of worth?"

Andi moved down close now, stepping nearer to him than any of the rest of her squad dared.

She looked at him. "Perhaps, but then you speak like a bitter old fool. Humans are still learning and exploring. We have suffered greatly too, but we haven't closed our hearts yet. Perhaps, you could stand to learn from us."

Zuzkrask was silent as he pressed on, weaving through the cracked sands in the shadow of the tower before them. Tremors rippled every few minutes, shallow at first, then heavier. Closer.

In the distance, the beast was looming closer, drawn by the echoing pulse. Andi could see more silhouettes, creatures of almost the same size, approaching slowly.

Then, she tripped. She fell over some kind of bone; it was as large as any stone she had seen poking out from the sand and rock. Picking herself up, she saw others like it, which she had taken for mere rocks; they were walking over a massive skeleton. Its bones were as thick as armour, with puncture marks that came from a shell the size of a Human's torso.

"A dead Skarthak. This one is old; it died before your kind saw the light of our stars," Zuzkrask said, examining the bone which Andi had tripped on. "They hated the Dwarves and their cursed machines; they did as much to drive them off the world as we did, but they were changed creatures..."

Zuzkrask paused, thinking. Andi was silent, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"They had become furious beasts that slaughtered everything stupid enough to cross their path. Many of my clan gave their lives to drive them beneath the ground..."

"You've seen these things before?" Andi asked.

Zuzkrask shook his head. "No, but my people remember them."

The ground shook again. "We should get moving," one of the Humans said, approaching Andi. "It looks like there are two of the creatures now, northwest rise. We're not far now."

"Your careless meddling woke them," Zuzkrask said. "We must deactivate the machine and leave quickly. So long as it still shakes the ground, more will keep coming, and so long as we are here, we are prey."

The Human's brow furrowed, and he gripped his rifle, but Andi touched his arm and said, "Wouldn't it be wisest to evacuate while we have the chance?"

"No Orcs are foolish enough to approach while the machine is running, and I do not trust your people to do it," the Orc Warrior grunted. "We will silence the machine before more come. If you wish to flee, you may, but your chances are greater if you follow us."

Andi looked hesitantly, then turned down to her comrade. "I agree with our Orcish friend. Let's not waste time."

The group repositioned cautiously, Humans moving closer to the Orcs as terrain around them shifted from sand to metal as they approached the heart of the abandoned tower. Every sound seemed sharper now. Every movement magnified. The relic's hum intensified, rising and falling like breath. It wasn't far away, perhaps a hundred metres or less, but the silhouettes of the Skarthaks loomed high in the distance above the crater. They stood still, but a third shadow now loomed alongside the first two.

"The Skarthak have paused," Orthzag spoke up. "...If we get to the relic first and shut it down, they might leave."

Hope sparked in the eyes of the HDF Infantry; they might just avoid the fight after all.

Zuzkrask shook his head somberly.

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"Have you forgotten the songs of your ancestors?" Zuzkrask grunted at Orthzag. "They wait. When the Machine falls silent, they will come for us."

"Why," Andi spoke up, looking toward the young Warrior and then Zuzkrask, "Why would they wait until it was done?"

"They are clever creatures," Zuzkrask replied. "They would gather as the machine worked, and then when the Dwarves grew tired or ran out of fuel, they would strike. Now, they wait for us to do the same."

"We should have run." One of the Humans looked away. "The Orcs are right, Andi, we had no business meddling with the relic."

"That old relic was going to detonate. "Dwarves were digging deep for their minerals," Andi replied bitterly. "If it went, it might have caused a chain reaction that could have taken the entire planet with it and interrupted our trade through the system."

"There was no such danger," Zuzkrask grunted. "We have seen the old machines do it before. But now is not the time to quarrel. Come."

Zuzkrask led them towards the relic that now loomed high over them. Quietly, efficiently, he moved with the confidence of one who had spent their life waiting for this moment. The songs of his old grandfather echoed through his head with each step.

"Deep beneath the grounds they cleared, They tried to bury what they feared. The fires were not to warm them. They were meant to warn them." As they circled the relic, Andi spotted a narrow gap in its casing—part of a Dwarven maintenance panel, blackened by heat but partially intact. Inside was a hollow. Storage, maybe. Or a records cache.

She reached in and withdrew a sealed shard of crystal, shaped like a palm-sized pyramid. Inside, etched across four panels, were runes in spiralled Dwarven script. She held it up to the light. "It's difficult to read and partly rusted over," Andi said, "but I might be able to decipher these runes..."

Zuzkrask said nothing but pushed a button and then another.

"What are you doing? You could cause it to explode sooner!" Andi moved to stop him, but Zuzkrask looked down sternly as he continued pressing.

"In my father's time, some warriors took to hunting Skarthak. They made for worthy sport. We lost too many of our own, and it was forbidden." Zuzkrask shook his head between button presses. "We are wiser now, but we still recall how to silence these machines."

Andi paused. "That might account for some of the irregularity with the signals... Maybe this one had been damaged somehow?"

Zuzkrask paused, a slight scowl on his face, but he nodded slowly. "Perhaps you are right, outsider."

Then he hit the final button.

The hum of the old machine came to a sudden stop, and the periodic shaking of the ground below finally settled, but then on the horizon, the silhouettes began to move.

"We should move," Zuzkrask said. "Now."

"We should get to a defensible position and make a plan there," Andi nodded.

Zuzkrask moved, and this time the Humans kept pace. Fresh fissures and the looming threat of the Skarthak meant that both moved with caution.

Yet, as they came near the edge of the crater, they saw a four-legged creature, larger than a Battle Truck, looming above them, looking down from the edge of the crater. It was armoured from snout to tail in interlocking bone plates, with long, sharp claws extending from each leg like sabres. Its eyes were a shimmering golden-red, glowering with a hatred that Zuzkrask knew too well.

"Is that an Skarthak...?" Orthzag spoke, trying to hide the quiver in his voice.

"We can't take that down with just rifles." Andi shook her head.

"We don't need to kill it." Zuzkrask corrected. "Just survive."

The ground shook beneath them, and a cloud of dust kicked up before them as the massive creature charged down the hill towards them. Without a word, Orcs and Humans opened fire in unison, rifles and pistols echoing off of the Skarthak's heavy armour as it thundered down the crater towards them.

Nothing seemed to slow its advance, however. The Humans and even Orcs moved around him, hurrying to get out of the way of the creature's advance, but Zuzkrask merely smiled. He readied the sword in his free hand and let his pistol fall by his side. His forebears had hunted this beast for generations; now he would do the same.

As the stampeding creature approached, the dust cloud cleared, and Zuzkrask saw its hateful eyes. He knew he had only one chance; leaping forward, he swung down his sword and drove it into the Skarthak's eye. The creature reared back, calling out in pain and exposing its soft underbelly.

"Now!" Andi called. Humans and Orcs both unloaded all that they could into the creature's chest as it roared and shook in shock.

Zuzkrask gripped his blade tightly, but it was not enough; he felt his fingers slip as the creature thrashed. Soon, he was flying through the air, a smile on his lips. Even if he fell, he would die fighting against the same beast that his people had hunted for generations. An honourable death.

Then he felt the impact. A shock through his entire body. He struggled to stay awake, but as he heard the creature fall, so too did his eyelids.

"You old fool. You could have died."

Zuzkrask opened his eyes; the HDF soldier was above him. Andi.

She was tying his arm with a bandage.

"We all will, if you do not hurry." He grunted, pushing himself up from the ground by his elbows. "The call will have told the rest where to find us. I can walk."

"You're in no position to tell me what you can do." Andi shook her head. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

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"Can you not count them yourself?" Zuzkrask replied sharply, pulling himself to his feet.

"Look, I'm trying to see if you have a concussion." Andi followed after him, not willing to let him walk away. "We're all on the same team now. We need to take care of each other."

"We take care of our own," Zuzkrask said as he kept walking up the crater. Then, suddenly, he lumbered forward and collapsed face first into the dirt.

Andi looked down at him with a raised eyebrow. She said nothing, but the Orc knew her thoughts and looked away, unwilling to give her the satisfaction.

"You!" Andi called out to Orthzeg, "You can carry your stubborn leader. If he won't listen to me, you can talk some sense into him."

Orthzeg obeyed the Human's instruction, helping Zuzkrask up and allowing the older Orc to lean on him for support as they followed their old route out of the crater. The younger Orc also handed him his blade, allowing him to lean onto it for balance on his other side.

In the distance, they could see two more Skartheks approaching towards them, one on either side of the crater. It would not be long before they reached them.

"We won't be able to hold them long," Zuzkrask said bitterly.

He gave a low grunt, and driving his blade into the ground, he pulled a feather from his armour.

"It belonged to my father," he said. "He gave it to me after our first hunt and told me I would be a great Warrior. You would be too; you fight well for a Human. You and your companions have earned it, though I do not have enough to give to all of them."

Andi accepted it with a nod, tucking it into her uniform's sleeve.

Orthzeg looked at his leader in shock, but Zuzkrask laughed.

"You are as impatient as I was." He said. "Do not fear, I will give you another when the time is right."

Orthzeg shook his head in surprise, wanting to explain himself, but then the ground shook slightly. The distant dust clouds were growing closer. The Skarthaks would be upon them soon.

"Be ready," Zuzkrask called out, his blade by his side. "We won't outrun them now."

Andi raised her rifle. "Positions!"

"Do not waste your shots," Zuzkrask said. "Aim for the weak points in Skarthek's armour: the eyes, the mouth, and the belly."

Zuzkrask watched as the Skarthak stampeded towards him; he held his pistol high, lining up his shot. To his sides, he heard others starting to fire, but he waited until he could see the gleaming red of the Skarthak's eye.

Then, the dust began to clear, and Zuzkrask saw it: the creature's eye, which was as large as his fist.

He squeezed down the trigger.

And missed; the shot clinked against the creature's chitinous hide.

"Damned pistol," Zuzrask tossed the gun aside and lifted his blade. "Let's finish this right."

Andi stepped beside him. "Not this time."

With that, she squeezed her trigger, laying down a spray of fire on the Skarthak, blinding it and causing it to stumble. Not seeking to miss his chance, Zuzrask moved forward, cutting along the creature's throat to finish it.

As Zuzrask and Andi fought one beast, the battle with the other raged around them. HDF rifles fired in synchronised bursts, their shots stitching patterns across the second Skarthek's hide. The Orcs moved wide, drawing the beast in while trying to strike at it from its flanks. Zuzrask charged first, his blade drawn, his war cry loud enough to shake the sky. His warriors followed, zigzagging through dust and fire.

The Skarthak responded in fury. One of its claws ripped a metal barricade in half, flinging a Human soldier skyward. Its other claw slammed down and nearly crushed Orthzeg, who rolled away and shot the beast's eye slit with his pistol. It shrieked and spun, its tail carving a deep trench in the sand.

Seeing his companion in danger, Zuzkrask lodged his blade free of the dead Skarthak's throat. Without wasting a moment, the Orc leapt at the still-living Beast, burying his blade into its shoulder. It shrieked and staggered but did not fall. The other Orcs piled in, striking at joints, eyes, and gaps in its armoured spine.

The surviving Skarthak staggering, now surrounded by Zuzkrask and the remaining Orcs with HDF troopers laying down as much fire as they could manage.

Seeing his chance, young Orthzeg broke through, slicing into the beast's neck. It reared, tossing him aside, but the Skarthak revealed its underbelly, and the Orcs rushed in to take advantage of the momentary weakness. The beast struggled, but HDF rifle fire disoriented the creature and soon, it had breathed its dying breath.

Zuzkrask lifted Orthzeg by his arm. The young Orc was bruised but the Skarthak's toss had not wounded him too badly.

"Take the dead," Zuzkrask said, "We do not have time to linger here. We cannot be certain that there are not more waiting for us."

Andi nodded, motioning to the surviving troops to do the same.

Side by side, they marched until the sun disappeared behind the horizon. Finally, Zuzkrask judged that they had come far enough. In the distance, they still saw a silhouette of the old Dwarven tower.

Zuzkrask marked out graves, ordering his Warriors to dig graves for their dead and those of the Humans alike. Wordlessly, the Humans joined them. There was little ceremony, except that as the last was laid to rest, Zuzkrask drove his knife into the ground and tied his feather to it.

"You kin fought well." He said to Andi, "They have earned a Warriors' rest."

"As did yours." Andi bowed her head. "May our shared fight prove to be the first step towards peace, for the living and dead."