



AGE OF FANTASY

TERROR IN THE DEEP



SHORT STORY

Drimthuk's chest shook as he gave a deep bellow of a cough. He could barely see to the end of his rifle, as coal smoke intertwined with the unnatural mists that had come ahead of their foes.

The Dwarf Markswoman next to him in formation glanced at him. Her face was so covered in soot that Drimthuk didn't recognise her until she spoke.

"Y'alright, Drimthuk?" She asked.

"Only some ash in the throat, Thurnga," Drimthuk said, steadying his rifle again. "We've worse things to fear."

He saw her brow relax as she let out a sharp breath. She paused for a moment as if she wished to say more, but then the dark-robed figures shifted. Her eyes darted forward.

Drimthuk looked ahead too, squinting as he tried to make out the moving shapes among the smoke.

"Steady on," Drimthuk said, "They're not in range yet..."

"Hold!" Althdrun, their sergeant, commanded. At his words, Drimthuk held his breath and fixed his eyes forward.

There was movement in the fog: faint glimpses of the long, unsightly limbs of the Shadow Stalkers as they approached, scrambling towards their line.

They could be there within seconds. He couldn't see their eyes beneath their robes, but they were close.

"Fire!" Althdrun gave the command, and Drimthuk squeezed his calloused finger against the trigger.

The entire line erupted like a thunderclap, followed by a chorus of wails and howls from beyond the smoke. Drimthuk exhaled, pushing away the fumes.

He loosened his grip on the trigger and shoved the muzzle of his rifle to the ground. He might be using it as a club soon; the Shadow Stalkers were close.

Then, metal pressed up against Drimthuk's shoulder from behind. He turned to see Mountain Warriors pushing past him to face the Shadow Stalkers. They raised their axes high as they barrelled forward.

Drimthuk watched on as he reloaded his weapon. The proud Dwarves met their foes with their shields closed into tight formation, swinging down their axes; they ran into battle striking with the force of a runaway boulder.

The Shadow Stalkers, meanwhile, moved like the mists that enveloped them, fading back and moving their long pale limbs to strike around the shields, leaving no opening unexploited. Yet, the Mountain Dwarves pushed on, hacking down their axes into the mists before them, slowly driving back their foes.

Yet, just as it seemed that the Dwarves in the front ranks were driving back the Shadow Stalkers, something shifted in the mists. A great mass was moving in the distance, bounding towards them.

"Ready your rifles," Drimthuk said, drawing his weapon up again and placing it against his shoulder.

"But the Mountain Dwarves are just ahead..." Thurnga said, pausing and looking towards Althdrun for guidance.

"Not for long," Drimthuk said grimly, his eyes locked on the shape bounding towards them. "Give the order, Althdrun."

Althdrun paused, looking at the mass of warriors before them and then Drimthuk. His eyes narrowed as he examined the old Dwarf and he let out a slow breath.

Before he could speak a word, a loud crash sounded out before them. Althdrun, Drimthuk and the others looked back toward the massive creature that had leapt forward before them. It was a blur of pallid flesh, horns, and boils which broke the Dwarven shield line ahead of them.

Its movement scattered the mists enough that the others could see its source: a hulking mount with the shape of a wingless dragon ending with a powerful tail spiked like a mace, but its flesh was as pale and hairless as an elf, though marked with horn-like obtrusions.

On it was a four-armed rider with a tail of his own by a rider whose uncanny shape was made only stranger by his veiled face and the mask which he wore wrapped above his head. The Shadow Stalker held two hands upon the reins and two more upon swords, which he used to cut down the Dwarves who were brave enough to raise their axes upon him.

"Give the order, Althdrun." Drimthuk repeated as the remaining Dwarves scattered and the Shadow Stalkers began to rally around the rider.

"Ready your weapons," Althdrun said, taking a deep breath as he looked at the Shadow Stalkers forming up before him in the mists. "Fire."

Drimthuk squeezed down one more and watched as a hail of shots rained down. Most were aimed at the massive mount, piercing the skin and causing it to cry out but seemingly doing nothing to slow the creature.

A corner of Drimthuk's mouth rose in a smirk at the shriek of the rider joining in the chorus as his shot flew into the shoulder of the Shadow Stalker atop the beast.

"What..." Thurnga muttered, as she watched the Shadow Stalkers begin moving towards them. "What is that thing?"

"We call that creature a Terror Beast," Drimthuk said, lowering his rifle to reload. He knew it was a vain gesture; the Shadow Stalkers would be on them shortly.

"Retreat!" Althdrun shouted the order. "Get to the mines! We'll make our stand..."

His orders were cut off by the sound of another thunderous landing. The creature tore into Althdrun with its massive teeth, causing the unfortunate Dwarf to let out a scream. The surrounding Dwarves moved to strike back, only to be swept aside by the mount's claws.

Drimthuk reached out with his free hand as it landed, finding Thurnga's pauldron and dragging her away as the remaining Dwarves were either slaughtered or scattered by the Terror Beast and its rider.

Drimthuk looked back to see the lifeless eyes of the rider's mask staring down at him, as if in accusation.

"We have to get away..." Thurnga muttered as Drimthuk dragged her behind him.

"Althdrun was right," Drimthuk said, panting as he ran. "We haven't much chance to outrun the beast. You might have better luck if you go your own way, but I'll make my stand in the mine."

With that, he released Thurnga's shoulder and took a moment to catch his breath. They were far enough that the mists now hid the sight of the fighting, and the sound of the battle was distant now; only the occasional boom of cannon fire echoed like thunder to remind them of the fate they'd left behind.

"I'll follow you," Thurnga said. "You're the only one who seems to know what we're up against..."

"All the more reason to run," Drimthuk said grimly, as he moved his head over the horizon, searching for something. After a moment he nodded slowly and shouldered his rifle, setting out at a brisk march away from the battle.

Thurnga looked back over her shoulder towards the battle. She touched her rifle and lingered for a moment before following.

Drimthuk said nothing as he walked, heading grimly along a gravel path as Thurnga's eyes darted.

"This is the way to the old mine, isn't it?" She asked. "Do you think we'll be able to hide there until this is over?"

"No."

Drimthuk's tone was cold, and his eyes were fixed forward. Yet, Thurnga pressed in behind, unwilling to back away until she had her answer.

"The mine came back to life a while ago," Drimthuk said. "We said we found a new vein, untouched from the days of the Orcs, but that's only half the truth."

Thurnga leaned in. "So, what's the whole truth?"

"... I was sworn to secrecy there," Drimthuk said. "But it's what the Shadow Stalkers are after. That damned creature's more trouble than it's worth to fight. Too many Dwarves have lost their lives for it already."

"If I'm going to follow you in there, I doubt I'll be making it out to spread your secrets." Thurnga said reluctantly, "But if you tell me more I can help."

Drimthuk looked down and paused. It was the first time he'd stopped moving since Althdrun died.

"...We found a Voidgate." Drimthuk said. "I did. From an old Dwarfhold. It's filled with enough diamonds to make us all very rich."

"And that's what the Shadow Stalkers want?"

"No, don't be daft!" Drimthuk grunted, "I saw mists coming from the Voidgate itself, not the other Plane. Then, days later, their envoys came, looking for something. It was too much wealth to give up, so the other miners took a vote... and we ourselves swore to secrecy. For the good of our village."

The entrance to the mine stood before them: a carved stone archway, inscribed with the faded runes of their ancestors, though they were impossible to read between natural erosion and the thick layers of mud that covered them.

He turned his head back towards the battle playing out on the other side of the village. It was impossible to see through the mists rising over their earthwork defences, but the sounds of battle seemed to have died down.

"They'll be here soon," Drimthuk said. "You'd best run."

Thurnga shook her head.

The entrance was broad, wide enough for two minecarts side by side. The eerie mists that had followed the Shadow Stalkers lingered along the floor of the cave. Drimthuk moved for the shaft leading down into the mine proper, narrow enough that they should have some degree of security and time before the Terror Beast could reach them.

Even as the gloomy, overcast afternoon vanished behind them, replaced by the stifling darkness of the mine, Drimthuk heard the echoing growl of the Terror Beast through the mines.

"Flee... Dwarves, but you cannot hide... here," the voice of its rider echoed through the mine. "I shall... take my revenge."

The rider spoke in Dwarven but with an accented tongue that seemed to emphasise strange syllables and soften the sounds of the consonants almost into a hiss.

Thurnga opened her mouth, but Drimthuk turned to her and said a single word: "Run."

At this, both of them broke into a sprint. Thurnga, still youthful, was soon a few steps ahead of him as Drimthuk's legs ached with running. Still, the shaft was not far; they would be there soon.

Then he heard it: the terrible sound of a dull thud against metal. Drimthuk watched as Thurnga stumbled forward, landing face down on the rocky ground. Back towards the entrance, he could hear the sound of the Terror Beast gaining on them both.

Drimthuk looked towards the minecart elevator, just ahead, but as he passed Thurnga, he slowed himself. He saw what had tripped Thurnga; a minecart rail hidden by the mists.

She looked up at him, blood and dirt marking her face as he extended his hand down to her. She gripped it, allowing him to pull her to her feet, but as she stood up straight, she winced. Drimthuk tried to pull her after him, but with each step she snarled and panted.

Then, she shook his hand away, pushing with all her strength. Drimthuk looked back at her.

"Go," she spat, throwing off his hand with hers. "I've twisted my ankle. I can barely stand, let alone run. Better to die with my gun in my hand."

Drimthuk turned to see the shadow of the Terror Beast getting closer. He closed his mouth tightly and pushed his rifle against his shoulder. Then he nodded.

Thurnga returned the nod with a grim smile and unshouldered her rifle.

Drimthuk reached the minecart elevator, quickly throwing the lever and praying that the ropes and counterweights had not thinned and snapped from neglect. The elevator creaked, and a small cloud of dust was disturbed by the slight jolting movement. It began to shift slowly, wheezing back to life.

Then, the sound of gunfire roared like an avalanche through the mine. Thurnga's shot made its impact on the beast; Drimthuk turned to see it rear back and roar out in pain. The Terror Beast was bleeding badly. More than a few shots had found their marks, and the axe of some ill-fated Dwarf hung off the creature's shoulder.

Yet, for all of that, nothing seemed to slow the Terror Beast.

As the elevator finally descended far enough that he could no longer see Thurnga before him, he heard the sounds. The sound of teeth against chainmail, of bones breaking against stone, and the dying screams of a young Dwarven woman.

If Thurnga spoke any words, Drimthuk couldn't make sense of them; it sounded only like agony.

Then a terrible crunching and the sound of metal snapping, which slowly approached the elevator as Drimthuk continued to descend.

"I can feel... you there, Dwarf." The Shadow Stalker hissed down. "Whatever you are... planning shall fail."

Drimthuk could hear the creature above scratching and clawing, snarling down at him as he descended slowly towards the base of the shaft.

"Sounds like your little Beastie is too large for our mines." Drimthuk grunted. "Leave it up there and face me, and we'll see how brave you are then."

"You shall regret those words." The Shadow Stalker hissed as Drimthuk then saw dirt falling down from above him like rain. In the faint light from the top of the elevator shaft, he saw that the Terror Beast was trying to widen the opening enough to drop down after him.

Then, he felt the gentle bump of the elevator as it hit the bottom of the shaft. Ahead, the light of the lantern at his belt reflected in a few glimmers of quartz still embedded in the walls of the mine.

The light was dim here, provided by sparse lanterns that hung through the corridors, but the layout was familiar enough that he could navigate the place even in the dark.

With the mists as thick as they were emerging from the Voidgate, it occurred to Drimthuk that he just might have to.

He moved down the narrow corridor; its winding and tight paths offered some advantage to him against the Terror Beast. Though it was agile for a creature its size, the pathways were designed for the short and squat frames of Dwarves and their minecarts. They were held up by beams of wood, often hammered together hastily in search of new veins.

Rails ran through the main paths of the minecarts, and he knew precisely which one to follow to reach the Voidgate, hidden deep within the ancient mine.

As he moved along the rail side, he looked towards the alcoves on either side of him. These narrow openings doubled back on themselves, too narrow even for a minecart. They could offer him a safe vantage point of attack, but it would leave him trapped in a dead end.

Then he heard the thud. The Terror Beast had reached the bottom of the shaft. Though Drimthuk had benefited from a head start, and the creature would be gaining on him soon.

"You're after the Voidgate," Drimthuk shouted back as he ran. "Aren't you?"

"And revenge on those... who opened it," the Rider said in his soft voice, "And on the... one who shot me."

The Terror Beast was moving slowly and carefully, at a steady pace. Its nostrils flared, sniffing so loudly that it echoed down the cave.

The Dwarf Marksman kept moving as quickly as he could, running past; even if he could defend an alcove for a time, he would eventually have to emerge to face down the creature.

"My beast smells the... taint off of you," the Shadow Stalker said. "More than any of the others, you knew... what you had opened... didn't you?"

His voice was soft, not shouting but echoing down the hall almost like a lullaby as he spoke. Drimthuk kept moving quickly ahead.

"Do you hope to... escape?" The Shadow Stalker asked. "Through the... taint. Your... gate? You will die first."

Drimthuk only snorted, but he kept moving as quickly as he could. For now, at least, he was managing to keep ahead of the Terror Beast.

The sweat dripped across his brow, but Drimthuk didn't stop. He couldn't. For Thurnga's sake.

Not until he found it.

Then he saw it: a minecart. Two dusty wooden blocks chocked the wheels in place. With a swift strike of his rifle butt, he knocked a block out of the way, only for his rifle to release a thunderous shot into the cave wall, impacting with the stone and launching shrapnel everywhere. Drimthuk shielded his eyes just in time.

The sound caused the Terror Beast to let out a screeching roar, and Drimthuk could hear its pace pick up into a sprint, seeking to silence the source of the sound that had hurt it so badly.

Drimthuk wasted no time in striking the block on the other side with the back of his now unloaded rifle. Pushing with all his might, the cart creaked in protest but then began to roll, picking up speed just as the elevator shaft behind him shuddered and rumbled.

By the time the Terror Beast emerged from the last corner, close enough that Drimthuk could smell the scent of its blood, the minecart was already picking up speed, hurtling deeper into the mine.

Drimthuk heard the crunching sounds of the Terror Beast and its rider galloping after him, but for the moment the stale air of the mine whipped past his face, and he lost sight of the beast somewhere distant behind him.

However, any relief he had was fleeting, for he knew it would only be a matter of time before the Shadow Stalker caught up.

As he rode deeper, he saw the old Dwarven columns, built of sturdy grey stone, immune from the rot of wood. A smile creaked across his face; it wasn't far now.

His eyes shifted up to the dark tunnel behind him. The grunts and gallop of the beast could still be heard, perhaps a few hundred paces behind him. He needed to find some sort of advantage to even the odds against such an abomination.

Then he saw there was a glint ahead, something down the tracks: lanterns.

As his mine car barrelled down the tracks, the narrow corridor widened suddenly.

He was no longer in a narrow vein but in an ancient room of a mighty Dwarfhold that had sunk deep beneath the earth. In this vast chamber, mighty columns, tall and evenly interspersed, stood as proud as they had in the days of their ancestors, though any inscriptions on them had long ago eroded away.

Then he saw it ahead of him; another minecart on the track, filled to the brim with diamonds.

Drimthuk pulled on his car's brakes, trying to slow his momentum, but it was too great. Looking to the side, he leapt out towards safety as the two carts collided.

Dusting himself off, he took stock of the room. In the back, the Voidgate swirled, soft mists covering the area. There were many other minecarts around him, each filled with coal or diamonds. There was enough of the former here to keep their homes fuelled for years and the latter to offer them riches rivalling that of the old Holds, lost long ago to the Orcs.

Drimthuk looked at the Voidgate and spat. He'd warned the others of the mist, but not one of the Dwarves who had seen the diamonds gave his words a moment of thought. Instead, he had been outvoted and sworn to secrecy.

He had been silent, even as the Shadow Stalkers came. The other mineworkers had said none of them would repeat the mistake of their ancestors who surrendered to the Orcs. The vote was almost unanimous to fight for their legacy and the inheritance of their children against these new strangers.

Now, it seemed he was fated to be buried with the wealth he had wanted to leave forgotten.

As the crunching, hunting footsteps came closer, Drimthuk's frantic eyes followed the columns upwards towards the ceiling. They were old and worn; the Dwarves had learned to take great care with them, as age had left them brittle, enough that it was possible to cause them to crumble without any great effort required.

This, he hoped, might be his last weapon against the Terror Beast. Working quickly, Drimthuk knocked over minecarts, trying to build himself some barricades.

He would just have to draw the creature in...

Then, he heard it snort.

"So you have... chosen to die among... your pitiful stones?" The Shadow Stalker said. "A... fitting tomb."

Though his foe's face beneath his veil, but Drimthuk could feel the satisfaction in Shadow Stalker's words.

Drimthuk narrowed his eyes and balanced his rifle against the back of his hand, holding up the lantern, squaring up his shot.

He squeezed down on the trigger, unleashing a thundering shot that echoed through the room.

He heard a bellowing roar of pain as the smoke obscured his view for a moment. When it cleared, he saw blood dripping down from the Terror Beast's head, between its great nostrils.

Its rider pulled back on the reins as it reared. But soon its feet touched the ground again, and it snarled furiously. He could hear the Beast's breaths were laboured; it was weakening, even exhausted, but it was still standing and still far more than a match for him.

Drimthuk simply nodded grimly.

"A grave... mistake." The rider said as the Terror Beast leapt forward at Drimthuk. The Dwarf ducked low, taking shelter behind a minecart as the beast hit hard against the column beside him, sending it crumbling.

Drimthuk scrambled to the next one, weaving between the columns as the Terror Beast turned to pursue him. He pivoted hard to his right as the Shadow Stalker's mount leapt after him.

He heard stone crashing behind him and the snarls of the panicking Terror Beast as it knocked over more of the densely packed columns.

The Dwarf had barely caught his breath when the Terror Beast began to turn again.

"You cannot... flee forever." The rider snarled. "You will not... make it to your precious Voidgate."

Drimthuk lowered his lantern, igniting the coal. Now, when the Terror Beast leapt at him, it burnt its claw, causing it to howl and stagger uncontrollably. It tumbled backwards, knocking over another column, and then another, tumbling onto its back and tossing its rider back.

Drimthuk stepped back cautiously. "I've no intention to run. Not any further. This Voidgate has caused me enough trouble. You can even seal the damned thing, if that's what you want."

He looked up as the ceiling above began to crack and fracture, straining under its own weight as the Terror Beast knocked into another column as it thrashed on the ground.

The rider rose slowly, cautiously. His top right arm still hung limp from the injury which Drimthuk had given him, while his back was now bloodied. He shifted the blade from his injured arm to his lower right arm.

"You... cannot hide in this smoke." The rider said, "I can hear your breath, I can feel your taint..."

He shifted his body around as the coal fire burnt around him.

Drimthuk stepped back towards the entrance, and through the smoke, he saw the Shadowstalker snap back to attention, honing in on his position.

Drimthuk stood still, loading his rifle as the Shadow Stalker approached.

"Your rifle... will not save you." The Shadow Stalker said. "You will... die."

Drimthuk took another step back and levelled his shot. He took a deep breath and thought of Thurnga and of Althdrun. Then he squeezed the trigger.

He closed his eyes as the blast echoed, erupting into a haze of black powder.

"You..." The Shadow Stalker panted, "Missed."

Then, there was a great roar from behind. The Terror Beast thrashed in a panic back to his feet.

Drimthuk opened his eyes in time to see the Terror Beast bounding forward furiously, as it had before. It barely slowed as it knocked over, cracking the stone as easily as brittle clay.

Its rider turned to see his infuriated mount bounding mindlessly towards him.

"It's a fitting tomb," Drimthuk said as he looked up at the collapsing ceiling. "But it won't be mine."