

# VETERAN

I hear drums when I sleep. The incessant pounding, speeding the beating of my heart leaves me restless and forlorn. What little was left of my humanity rests there on the battlefield among the crows feeding on the corpses.

I've seen it all. Border skirmishes between local lords, baiting, provoking the forces of the enemy in small meaningless raids. Huge battles where thousands marched grimly to their deaths as line upon line of soldiers clashed over some bone of contention between the nobles who observed from a safe distance. I have seen war before the Calamity and I have seen war since as I led my troops against the marauding greenskins, clawing back the lost territory one desolated field after another.

I have seen death, so much death. It is always dirty – caked with mud, guts spilling on the ground, the gurgling of blood, panic in their eyes. They fear death because they are terrified of what comes next, but they no longer wish living because the pain, the terror is too much. Poor souls.

We were holding a ridge during assault on what used to be a noble castle. Overrun by gnolls and worse, its fortifications ruined, this spire stood in the distance as a grim tombstone over the grave of humanity. It was raining. It always seems to rain on day of the battle. The troop I led was a bunch of young lads, barely old enough to be conscripted. The way they held their spears, the way their cheap armor sat awkwardly on their gaunt shoulders – after a while you know which ones make it out and these weren't going to. The way they looked at me – I swear, I couldn't take it, as I was the only one who could make sense of this hell of a life, the only one who could keep them safe. No one could.

The battle was going well, the ranks of the gnolls receding. The battle horns were blaring, drums maintaining their steady thumping – the heartbeat of war. From our position on the ledge my boys were raining arrows into the thick of the enemy horde, doing some good damage. "Loose! Another volley! Make them bleed!". Then, an infantry troop below broke ranks, their terrified screams betraying panic. If they would let the enemy through, the formation would not hold, surrounded our lines would collapse. I have seen it all too often – the breach had to be secured.

"Spears up!". My barked order catches the lads' attention. A spark of doubt flashes over their eyes as they are hesitant to leave the safety of the ledge, but if our ranks below are overrun – there will be no safety not on this ledge, not behind this hill, not for miles around. "Charge! Fill the breach! Fight to the death! Impale their hides, boys!". Spurred on by my fury the troop launches into an attack, spears at the ready, rushing in just as the gnolls are starting to break through. The wet, disgusting sounds of metal piercing monstrous hides is mixed with the furious yelping of the gnolls as the ranks clash and the melee is joined. A supportive cheer goes out from the soldiers in the shield wall who, renew their fight, feeling emboldened.

And then the monstrous humongous figure rises behind the gnolls. Its grey skin covered with rocky growths, impenetrable to the feeble spears of our recruits. Its tusks covered in blood from savaging the bodies of the dead. Its mighty arms outstretched as it lets out a deafening roar. A troll. I see a boulder headed my way a moment too late and the world is sent into a spinning abyss as I am thrown hard against the ground. I hear the drums mixed with the screams of the dying.