

Deep Roots

The dream seems to never end. It replays as a steady constant. You see every moment spent watching over the clutches, as the magic warps itself into reality and flesh. Your people took stock of each living creature, whatever kind of thing it was- bird, plant, reptile, bug- always , deciding what would be kept or culled. If it had a place in this world, you would trust the orcs to protect the thing's life until it found its niche. If any of those creatures became corrupted or dangerous, your people would rise to protect the orcs in their fields and rid them of the threat. This was our situation that endured for eons. The long- lived orcs were constant and steady companions, never faltering in their tasks and or duty.

When the call came out. When the need arose to defend all that we were, and all that we could be, came. Your people answered. Your hands reached into the dirt and brought forth a shield of stone. Caressing the trees, you reached into them and were given a cudgel of the hardest ironwood. When you reached the place of destiny, you stood outside the great circle. The protective shielding dome behind you, and along with others you prepared to defend the ritual. along with the other protectors. Here you stood with the best the realm had to offer. Dragons. The Dragons, pillars of creation and destruction, but stood as defenders of the land they wrought. The Dark Elves, with the sun at their back, prepared cannon and other implements across their fleet in the sky. You could hear The Celestial chorus with their songs echoed, empowering the great crystal batteries. Selunari stood in families within the dome behind you, communing with their great crystals to fuel the ritual. The wardens placed themselves just outside, guarding them, their armor and helmets seeming to almost meld with their skin. The Hobblings, were spaced further out with the initially non-combatants, were ready to assist should anything go wrong. The Librahms were spaced within each unit, each clutching a blood stone, and were spaced with each unit to record this victory for posterity. Secured behind rocky terrain and crouching behind layers of traps, the Harbingers were waiting. Their spells and cunning had been indispensable against their former masters. Standing tall and proud, the Giants stood in their gleaming armor, their beards braided but not quite able to and slightly muffling their mutterings about visions. They claimed this battle was necessary, but they would not join the front line as we, the coalition, wished, and the giants were the only people to have prepared a retreat. This unsettled you, something unseen in your mind through a subconscious voice whispering that they may be right. The Jade Pact, the elves of the forest, stood in a line around the dome. Their casters were preparing to unleash powers that were rumored to have received from the Fae. As always, the Orcs stood shoulder to shoulder with you. They were farmers and cultivators. However, you have seen them at both work and war, and they could turn almost anything into a weapon for the right cause. They had earned their place here.

You heard it before you saw it. That sound of space and time tearing, just as the ritual began behind you. The invaders did not approach as you had expected. Instead, they tore through reality itself, rifting into the field before your assembled forces with a horrible sound that deadened part of your spirit: “ VREEEEEEEEEEEEch!”.

The battle itself was a blur, with pain and blood and the sound of your cudgel coming down again, and again, and again on the waves of invaders. You remember standing there, the corpses of friends and foes surrounding you, your feet planted as if rooted, calling forth strength from the earth itself to push back and crush waves of foes. It was there that you first felt the choking and weakening of the world as the first great dragon fell. These invaders, these Vreech, swarming over the unmoving body, devouring its flesh and very essence in great gulping swallows. There was no glory here- just horror. With each life extinguished, little pieces of you were breaking- shattering. You allowed your shield to fall away, and as it did the stone returned to the earth, but seemed brittle. You grimaced, asking the cudgel to extend to a great maul. You are the will of the earth, the rage of the world. You waded through the battle, striking down foes with anger and grief, finally coming to stand next to the Dragon of Life. The battle raged on as the ritual continued inside the circle. Your vine wrapped sinew, taut and corded, creaked as you pulled hefted the maul to bring pain to those who stood before you.

You remember bringing the maul back from a wave of execution, spinning it in your hand as there was a moment of respite. However, before you could catch your breath though, shade fell upon you. As you turned, eyes darted behind searching for the threat, only to wince at the unworldly crackling scream of the thing approaching the great dragon. Even after the eons of culling monstrosities, you had no words for this thing. Yet it rose, a being of nightmares and horror, a writhing terror that had no place in this world. Quickly, it closed the distance to the dragon. In a flash, the abomination met the dragon in an onslaught. These mere seconds of battle seemed like hours. The monstrosity ripped and sheared the dragon relentlessly, but her injuries healed as soon as they appeared. When the dragon tore pieces from this creature, they fell crackling to the ground, and, to your shock, each piece member formed a monster of its own, attacking the dragon with equal ferocity before it even had sprouted anything claws or teeth to injure her with. It was one such creature that drew your attention. As the desiccated flesh hit the ground, shivered, and sprouted too many legs, some useless, some strong, it began to hurtle towards you. You raised your maul to meet it as a chorus of screams, a searing cacophony unlike anything you had ever heard, encompassed the field. The magic was wrong. The world shifted beneath you as you felt, deep in your spirit, the ritual had failed.

As your gaze swung wide, the Vreech swarmed like mountainous seething waves over the mountainous bodies of the great dragons- defenders, the life-bringers, your lords. Righteous fury numbed every other possible thought. Reaching as deeply into the earth as you could, bringing forth the power of the world that always had run through you..... Nothing. The battle seemed to slow and stop in this moment. Your ears rang, your mouth went dry, there was no breath to be had, and your heart seemed to seize. The connection was severed. You.... were severed. The broken thing attacking you had now grown a maw and was falling upon you. Your maul met the thing with the same speed and force, but as the thing screamed and fell, your body trembled at the sudden cost. You could feel everything that you are, or were, bleeding from an invisible wound, sinking into the now foreign dirt beneath your feet. A great roar pierced your shock, nearly deafening you as the all-powerful dragon of life fell underneath the countless gnashing maws tearing at her. With dulling senses, your body acknowledged a scythe-like talon coming to end you. "Not this day.", a familiar voice rumbled as the talon was deflected into the

ground beside your heaving form. Turning slowly as if the very air resisted you, you watched as a bloodied orc drove the Vreech back, heaving it away from you and holding it to the ground. As it writhed and screamed, the Orc only needed one arm, strengthened from decades at the plow, to keep it steady as the pitchfork pierced the abominations skull and twisted with a sickening crack. The world dimmed and swayed as the Orc approached you. You fell to your knees, feeling as if all that remained of you was the flesh clinging to your bones. The world was now dark, the last things you remember were the feeling of rough hands lifting you and a low murmur in your ear: "It's alright, old friend. I've got you."

The world you knew has ended, in every possible way. All that existed for you were the endlessly fragmented dreams. Of the slowed images, Sluggish dreams of the Dragons dying,. Again and again. Empty dreams of the powers of creation and the ways of protecting it, seeping out of you, leaving a hole. So many images of pain and regret rolling through your mind.

Until recently.

Your dreams have become more clear as of late. Hope welled wells within you and presented presents as images of verdant forest and wildlands interspersed with. Dreams of ruins and old grudges. Familiar flashes of landscapes are slowly overtaken by fleshy growth that resonated with undoing. You feel that who you were, what you are... is changing. As you sleep, your body has adjusted to this new world. The tethers and old oaths have fallen away, but your spirit itself has bonded to these lands and given oaths unsung. All you knew was that everything has changed. And soon it would be time. Soon you would be called again. Now was the time for the ancients to rise and be reborn. All at once your reverie ended. You sat up and began to cough. Your skin was slick with...dew? Around you, moss glowed with a sullen blue light. You were on a mound of earth at the corner of some well prepared room. Odd flowers and foliage were shaped around you, like well maintained bedding.

Before you was an Orc, a farmer, no doubt. In his shock, he reflexively squeezed a trigger on some sort of watering can contraption he had been apparently been using and a cloud of water vapor poured forth around you. His bottom jaw worked for a moment before roaring... "SHE IS AWAKE!!" The sound was half horror and half reverence. This orc seemed familiar somehow, but you could not place it.

You pulled for the support and strength of the earth as you stood and found the source empty. This forces you to rely on your own tired and weakened muscles were all that was left to rely on. Everything hurts. You could not hear the whispers of life around you and somehow, that hurt more. A familiar face coming down the hallway presented itself as an orc in dark clothing, slightly soot covered. Why were we in these damn caves anyways... you hate cramped spaces. This orc has the bearing and structure of the one who saved you. You grinned and stepped forward on unsteady legs, but as torches were brought in and unfamiliar arms steadied you, you realized that the face was not the same. Nor were any of the orcs that poured in with them. Relatives, perhaps?

The orc with a glowing crystalline staff drew back her cowl and smiled in a mixture of pity and awe. "Old friend. We are glad you have awoken. We have much to discuss. Our parents, theirs, and many yet before them have told us of you. We have kept our word and duty. We have defended, cared for, and fed you. You have awoken...just in time."