

GRIMDARK
FUTURE

OLD WOUNDS

SHORT STORY



**ONE
PAGE
RULES**

Old Wounds

by Dillon Olney

ER3R trudged through the cold water of the swamp with his gauss rifle gripped loosely in his hands. Behind him, he could hear the tripod walkers splashing through the shallow water and thick vegetation. The mist swirled and shifted, creating strange shapes that seemed to loom or rush out of the dark.

When they first landed here, the mist had lain like a heavy blanket. "After the firing of gauss rifles, the blasts, the chaos and the screaming; well, it made sense the mist of the planet had been whipped into a frenzy by the legion's attack," ER3R thought. Still, he found the shapes in the mists unnerving as his optical sensors kept giving off false positives. At times, he was certain that some of the shapes shifting in the mist were reflecting images from his memory banks... memories he would rather leave in the past.

"Hey, bolt brain!" AN2E called to him, pulling him from his thoughts. ER3R turned toward her, tilting his head. "Doesn't this remind you of that moon we were sent to a few years back? Supposed to be an oasis - turned out to be a muck pit - You were so angry, ha! What was the name of that place again?"

"Cras- something," ER3R responded, grinning inwardly. That mission had been a bit of a disaster, but it was where he and AN2E had met. "We didn't find the Elves on that moon, but we sure as hell found them here," ER3R reminisced, wading through the water and gently pushing aside the half-sunken corpses of several Legionnaires.

"We gave them a run for their money this time, didn't we, Captain?" AN2E said.

ER3R could hear the pride in her voice.

"That we did, AN2E, that we did..." ER3R trailed off, spying more Robot Legionnaire bodies ahead. He took a moment to look at his former compatriots, as if to burn the sight into his processors "We should check ahead. Might be a few survivors, and who knows how many of those Elves are still lurking around. Their main fleet may have pulled out but a few stragglers haven't managed to make it off-world yet."

AN2E gave an affirmative signal, and the pair took up formation, sweeping the area. Several of ER120R's Legionnaires trailed behind, taking up a tighter searching formation.

The mist shifted again, and ER3R gripped his gauss rifle tightly. He was certain that his optics had detected something rushing through the swamp, but there were no footsteps, no one trudging through the water.

"Ghosts," he vocalized softly, calling up a term from his memory for accounts of lingering images of the long dead.

A few meters ahead, ER3R noticed something half submerged. A Legionnaire with a hole straight through its head shot from behind. Inner mechanisms so meticulously designed were shattered and ruined, scattered about in the muck.

The mist shifted again, and with it, so did ER3R's thoughts. His memory banks began to whirr and, without his command, delved into his past, stored memories that he might have sooner forgotten.

ER3R was sitting on a ship. The bay doors were just barely opening. It was his first mission: an attack on a High Elven base. B2ES was seated across from him, also on his first mission. The two had been swapping stories for hours.

"Are you prepared to take the fight back to the Elves?" ER3R asked, and B2ES nodded, though ER3R could tell he was nervous, as there was an almost audible hum from his circuits.

The ship rumbled for a moment, before settling.

"We've landed!" shouted the commander, and ER3R and the other legionnaires prepared to take the offensive.

B2ES stood in front of him, and ER3R could sense his fear.

"Hold fast, friend," he said, gripping B2ES on the shoulder. His companion shot a glance back at him, one so filled with fear it made his circuits run cold.

"I don't think I can do this..." he trailed off, jumping as the bay doors opened with a pneumatic sound accompanied by screaming from the outside of the ship and gunfire blasting in.

"Oh no... no no!" B2ES whispered, "No, I don't belong here!" He turned around, trying to move away from the opening doors.

"Hold fast friend!" ER3R spoke clearly over the gunfire, looking into B2ES eyes. He saw a flickering in them for a moment, a display of fear as the lights of his optic sensors struggled, before a Shardgun blast ripped B2ES's head apart.

ER3R shook off the ghost of his first battle. In his memories, B2ES no longer had a face, he had been reduced to nothing more than a wreckage of wire and gears, shot from behind.

"I think I got something over here," AN2E called, motioning for him to join her. ER3R trudged through the water, some of it reaching up to his waist. He was careful not to let it leak into the old wound on his side.

The repair work should have left it watertight, but... he preferred not to risk it. The water gave way to shallow mud, and here he saw what AN2E found: tracks.

Several sets of footprints leading away into the mist.

"Well done, soldier," ER3R clapped AN2E on the back, "Elven boot prints. They must either be deserters, or what's left of their forces. Either way, we need to check it out." ER3R motioned for the tripod walkers to follow at a distance.

They followed the tracks for several hours. Many Legionnaires laid along the trail, damaged beyond repair. In one spot, the tracks were almost too muddied to follow; that is, until AN2E called him over once more. Wordlessly, she indicated a wreck in the muck.

"One of ours, and tracks leading away from the body," she said, and ER3R could hear the anger and sadness in her voice. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder reassuringly. Staring into the glistening wreckage of wires, gears, and fluids spread from the Robot's remains.

ER3R was again taken back to the ghost of a memory...

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"Take cover!" ER3R commanded, ducking under a window and lifting his gauss rifle to fire through the shattered glass.

A blast rocked the building, and several of the Robots hiding there cried in fear.

ER3R looked at his contingent of Legionnaires: weapons and ammo gone, most of them dead or wounded, huddled in a dilapidated building as explosive blasts drew ever nearer.

AN2E crouched behind him, holding her rifle at the ready.

"We got this, Commander," she whispered. "We got this!" she said again, this time loud enough for the other Warriors to hear.

"Yes, Commander!" called FR1N, standing and readying his rifle at the adjacent window.

"We got this!" FR1N continued, "We aren't backing dow..."

A third explosion wracked the building, this one flying straight up to the window. FR1N was there one moment and gone the next. His body reduced to shattered metal and inner workings strewn about the building...

ER3R was pulled from his memories as he noticed AN2E motioning him away from the wreck. ER3R reached out to touch the wreckage of the Legionnaire lying near the muddy tracks. He held it just a moment, before turning to AN2E.

The aftermath of battles with the High Elves was always the worst part for him. In the thick of battle, ER3R could forget about his past, the memories flickering through his processing centre. Fighting demanded his full attention, on keeping his men alive, and on making the hard calls.

It was always the aftermath that was the worst.

Then, there was time for him to think.

Time to remember.

This mist, with its strange twists, wasn't helping.

He trudged alongside AN2E through the mud, listening to the sound of strange crickets chirping and the occasional splash from further back as the tripods kept up with them dragging their legs through the water as much as they could, creating as little sound as possible.

Anyone ahead would hear AN2E and him before they ever heard the tripods behind.

"Still got a few loose screws rattling around in there, Captain?" AN2E asked, shooting a glance his way. For a brief moment, the two exchanged glances. Then she turned away. She scanned the mist for any signs of the Elves they pursued.

"Yes, I'm afraid I might have," ER3R responded softly, rubbing at a section of his chassis, his chest. This section was a different metal and colour than the rest of him, a replacement part from an old wound.

The mist was so thick here that he occasionally lost sight of AN2E even when she was a couple meters away from him.

The twilight mist blinded him with its opaque fog, blurring the difference between reality and memory. Though he knew it was not possible, he still felt a pain in his damaged side.

He rubbed his hand across the discoloured metal, and the mist seemed to enter the wound, revealing the most vivid memory yet...

ER3R stumbled through the smoke and ash, reeling forward. All around him, several other Robots shuffled about on unsteady legs.

He could hear cries of fear and panic; some Robot, some Elven.

Shots rang out in the street. Behind him, an Elven Protector gestured for him and the other Robots to move forward. The Elf held a Shardgun in his hand, directing them nervously.

The Shardgun in his hand shook slightly as he hurried ER3R and the other Robots forward.

"Keep moving," the Elf said shakily, "Just keep moving. The commander will know what to do with you. I'm sure this is just some malfunction. We will have you in working order soon enough."

ER3R complied, stumbling on through the smoke. A shadowy figure appeared through the haze. It wore a pale white cloak, the hem stained with oil and mud, flapping in the wind, and its back toward the approaching Robots. The Elf prodding them on with his Shardgun spoke up in a timid voice.

"Commander," he called, "I've taken some of the malfunctioning Robots prisoner. They surrendered to us, and well... I wasn't sure what to do."

The Elf standing in the hazy smoke turned around, and cold grey eyes stared out at ER3R and the other Robots, eyes of steel that darted quickly between the Robots. There was a hint of desperation in them, a look quickly replaced with an unfeeling, wicked stare.

"You took them prisoner, Abrodranos?" the grey-eyed Elf asked incredulously, looking at the Elf as if he had spoken in some foreign tongue, "Prisoner? ...As if these things were people? They're just broken machines."

The steel-eyed Elf let out a clinical sigh. He walked toward ER3R, who stood directly in front of the elf, Abrodranos.

"Tell me," The steel-eyed Elf spoke again, "do you really think that this little device is suddenly a person? Do you plan to rehabilitate it? You'll be chatting to your Shardgun next..."

The steel-eyed Elf drew his blade. ER3R stepped back, confused.

"Captain, I, er, they... Well, the Robots aren't what they were before. They've, well, changed. There's something more to them now," Abrodranos said, stepping forward, almost shoulder-to-shoulder with ER3R.

The steel-eyed Elf shook his head with bemusement. Somewhere not too far off, the sound of explosions and Shardgun fire boomed through the smoky air.

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"We don't have time for this," the steel-eyed Elf sighed, turning in the direction of the blasts. "We have to resolve this quickly, rather than dwelling on pointless niceties of philosophy. These aren't prisoners, these are machines."

The steel-eyed Elf plunged his sword into ER3R's side.

ER3R felt the weapon rip into him, his processors screamed out as his side was punctured, his chassis torn open. He held desperately to his chassis, stumbling backward and away from the Elf. He toppled to the ground, careening into a nearby ditch. His processing system stalled for a moment, and to all the world, he looked dead. Some of his internal mechanisms were exposed, sparking in the night air: a flickering, sickening display.

"Look," the steel-eyed Elf said coldly, pointing to ER3R's wound, "What do you see? Circuits, wires and bolts. The machine is not going to bleed out. It is not going to die. It was just a broken device running a malfunctioning program. And now? It's just scrap."

Abrodranos looked down at ER3R and the steel-eyed Elf touched his shoulder reassuringly, giving a benevolent smile.

"If you see one of these things malfunctioning, you must simply take your shard gun..." he said, grabbing the weapon and pointing it at one of the other Robots.

"And disable the hardware," he said coolly, pulling the trigger.

From his place in the ditch, ER3R could just barely make out the other Robot toppling to the ground in a crumpled heap.

"But commander..." Abrodranos tried to protest.

"I have been patient with you, but we do not have time to discuss this further," the grey-eyed Elf frowned, gripping his sword, "We do not have time for prisoners."

The steel-eyed elf stepped forward, looking Abrodranos in his eyes, "We do not have time for reprogramming. We do not have time to wonder whether or not a bunch of scrap metal can think. We need to get this situation under control as quickly as possible... Am I understood?"

There was a moment of silence.

"...Yes, sir," Abrodranos replied with some hesitation.

"Then carry out your orders."

ER3R lay still in the mud, listening to the Shardgun fire a dozen more times. He lay perfectly still as the bodies crumpled to the ground one after another, thud... thud... thud... One of the Robots attempted to flee, tripping through the dirt.

It was blasted through with Shardgun fire, collapsing almost on top of ER3R. Through the smoke and haze, ER3R saw the cold steel-eyes glaring in his direction. It was as if they burned through the smoke, wretched and murderous. Burnt forever into his processing system.

But the steel-eyed Elf seemed to have forgotten he was there or perhaps thought he was dead or not worth the time to check.

"Scrap," he heard the Elf mutter as he turned away, marching once more into the grey winds of ash, his pale cloak rippling behind him.

Monster, ER3R thought as his systems faltered, consciousness fading away...

ER3R shook his head to cast out the horrid memory.

He rubbed his side again, then turned as AN2E motioned to him through the mists.

"Someone up ahead," she whispered. ER3R nodded. He could see it too, several figures moving through the mist, ducking behind moss-covered trees and rocky outcroppings.

Suddenly, flashes of gunfire pierced the mist. Immediately to his left, there came a gasping sound. ER3R turned and saw AN2E crumble to the ground.

He screamed as she fell, levelling his gauss rifle and firing into the horrid mist.

There was a cry of pain from the enemy's side. Their guns fell silent, but the Robots could hear the sound of shuffling and panicked whispers in Elvish.

"Come out, and drop your weapons," ER3R commanded, recognizing the shape of Elves moving in the near-dark.

"We surrender! We're dropping our weapons!" a terrified voice issued through the veil.

ER3R quickly motioned for his troops to move in while he rushed over to AN2E's side. He looked down over her, seeing the wound in her chest.

Her eyes were blank... she was gone.

ER3R knelt next to her slowly, removing the rifle from her grip. Looking at the personalization his fallen comrade had made upon it, the rifle was notched with markings: each a circle with a planet or moon's name beneath it.

Examining them more closely, ER3R realized these to be all the planets and moons he and AN2E had visited together. He gripped it tightly; his entire body shook as he struggled to process what had happened. Then, slowly, he rose. His circuits ran cold with fury as he turned the rifle toward the Elves now being brought forward out of the mist, hands held high.

Many of them were wounded and hobbling along. He watched over his shoulder as his Warriors wrenched a weapon from an Elf with a fresh gauss wound in his shoulder... an Elf wearing a deathly white cape with steel-grey eyes...

ER3R leapt from AN2E's side, enraged, disbelieving, thinking, *could this be the same Elf? Could it be that monster?*

With his strength rallied in his rage, he crossed the distance to the Elf in a few strides and rammed AN2E's rifle under his chin.

Those steel-eyes, those damnable eyes, stared back at him, completely unrecognizing.

"Was it you!?" ER3R asked, gesturing with a jerk of his head toward AN2E's body.

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The Elf glared back, looking at the corpse, then down at the rifle in ER3R's hands, then back and forth to the two Robot Warriors holding his arms wrenched behind his back.

The Elf spoke in a cold, almost indifferent tone, as if weighing each syllable as he spoke.

"We had our orders." he said, staring at ER3R with his wretched eyes. ER3R rammed the rifle harder into the Elf's neck, eliciting a grunt of pain. He stared into those horrible eyes and then down at the white, tattered cloak.

"You followed your own orders," ER3R spoke with a low hiss like steam. He motioned for his men. They pressed the Elf to his knees in the muck. "It seems the tables have turned. This time, you are the one in the mud, and I have the rifle."

The Elf scrutinized the Robot carefully from the mud. As if trying to read a half-remembered language, the steel-eyes sought for anything familiar.

At last, the Elf shook his head, "Have we met before?"

ER3R called out to his men, "Round them up!"

There were shuffling movements in the dark and in the mist, grunting, a few cries of pain as the Elves were brought to bear, each shoved down in the mud next to "steel-eyes."

"You don't remember me, do you?" ER3R stared at the Elf, into those cold eyes, and saw no recollection there at all.

He did see a flicker of fear as the tripods came into view, feet swimming strong and careful through the thick muck: a death sentence for these remaining Elven troopers. Assuming that there would be any left when he was through with them.

He could see the Elf's demeanour alter ever so slightly. There was a note of nervousness was exposed in his voice that had not been there before.

"Why should I?" the steel-eyed Elf replied with a defiant tone, "I've seen a hundred battles and fought many of your kind. What is one faceless face such as yours to me?"

ER3R levelled the gauss rifle, his men around him doing the same, pointing their weapons at the kneeling Elves.

"It's important that you remember what you did before I kill you and your wretched companions," ER3R said, his voice cold and filled with a chilling rage.

This time, genuine fear could be heard in the Elf's response, "I... I don't. I don't know what you want me to say... I can't remember who you are."

ER3R trembled with rage. Bitterly, he pressed his rifle against the steel-eyed Elf's head.

"Perhaps, this will refresh your memory," ER3R echoed the words burnt long ago into his memory banks, "We do not have time for prisoners. We will get this situation under control as quickly as possible... Am I understood?"

ER3R glanced across the line of Elves and saw the fear in their eyes, saw them trembling in the mud, surrounded and

unarmed. Some of his companions looked at him but they kept their rifles ready, waiting for his order.

He looked down at the barrel of the gauss rifle in his hands, AN2E's rifle. He saw the planets and moons etched there, dozens of systems, countless memories. He looked into those steel-grey eyes, and saw his own eyes reflected.

He was the commander now, looking over helpless prisoners with a weapon primed in hand; he was... the monster.

ER3R paused. By all rights, his Elf deserved death. Yet, abusing power over those who could not defend themselves was the horrific trait of people like him, not of the legion. And ER3R was a proud member of the legion, not some arrogant bully in commander's stripes.

He lowered his rifle.

"Stand down..." he said, rubbing the old wound on his side. He looked to the corpse of AN2E and across the line of Elves, soldiers all, fighting on hundreds of systems... countless cities.

"Take them prisoner, we will show them the mercy not shown to our legion," ER3R said, his voice little more than a whisper.

Rising in volume, ER3R continued, "We will be an example; we will be the example. We will show them what it means to have a soul, to be alive. We will prove we are more than just scrap."

He spits out the last word in a foul utterance of consonants. He rubbed his side again then took his hand away, looking down at the steel-eyed Elf.

He spoke softly, but with great purpose,

"Old wounds need not mean new ones."

He turned his back on the Elf. He touched the wound on his side once more, for the last time. As his hand came away and instead gripped AN2E's rifle, rubbing a digit over one of the carvings, he felt at peace.

The ghosts haunting his memories finally left his core, they held no power over him now.

Grimdark Future - Old Wounds

Mission Background

At the tail-end of many battles, winning forces sweep the smoke-covered battlefield for any remaining stragglers, whilst the defeated try to get their wounded out before it's too late.

The Battlefield

For this mission you'll need a 6'x4' table with at least 10-15 pieces of terrain on it.

The Armies

For this mission you'll need two armies, with the attacking army having 25% more points than the defender.

Attack & Defend

Before the game, the players roll-off, with the winner picking to be either the attacker or the defender.

Deployment

The attacker must first deploy their entire army in zone A, and afterwards the defending player must deploy their entire army in zone B.

First Turn

The players must roll-off to see who gets the first turn.

Objectives

Before the game begins, count the total number of units in each player's army, with combined units and heroes joining units counting as one.

After deployment, players have to set up a total of D3+3 objective markers.

Starting with the defending player, the players alternate in placing one objective marker each outside of the deployment zones, and at least 9" away from other objectives.

At the end of each round, if a unit is within 3" of a marker whilst enemies aren't, then the objective is seized.

Whenever the attacker seizes an objective marker, that marker is removed from play.

The game ends after 4 rounds, and if the attacker managed to destroy at least half of the units in the defender's army, they win. Else if the defender managed to seize at least one objective at the end of the game, the defender wins.

Special Rules

Battle Weary: Units with Scout may only move by 6" when deployed, and units with Ambush must be deployed over 18" away from enemy units.

Thickening Fog: At the beginning of each round, roll one die, on a 1-4 place a fog marker next to the table, and on a 5-6 remove a fog marker instead. For each marker all units get -1 to hit when shooting at enemies over 12" away.

