

# A Soldier's Journal

Today, after my first battle, I have decided to keep this journal of my thoughts and experiences during my service in the King's army. This isn't for prosperity, merely my own outlet from the confusion and pain that I am now experiencing.

I have heard that battle is both terrifying and exhilarating. Perhaps, I have heard it said, the reason that it is so terrifying is because it is so exhilarating. I only found it terrifying. How anyone could find exhilaration in the death of so many, friend or foe, is beyond my understanding. The pure carnage of the whole ordeal is so...vile, so...base, that to even think about it, much less press it to virgin paper, is enough to turn my resolve to water. And yet, perhaps writing it down may be the only way to come to terms with my part in it.

We had heard about the approach of the goblin hordes. Rumours had abounded for weeks of their impending attack. No one knows why the goblins, who usually raid outlying, unprotected villages and towns in small bands of raiding parties, would join together with orcs and trolls to attack a city the size of Sitoria Aeraemel. The council suspects some great evil behind the banding. It matters little to the average elven foot soldier. What matters is the enemy at the doorstep. Our scouts had reported that the vast goblin army, for that is what they predominately were, would reach the city in five days. Our king decided that we would meet them at the Tuhor, a clearing about two day's march from the city. We would have to reach the clearing before our enemies, but it is widely known that an elven army can travel almost twice as fast as any other when pressed. Our concern was minimal, even though the goblin army was more than twice our own. It is also widely known that one elf fighting for his homeland is worth at least three goblin raiders. So, in effect, it was we who outnumbered them. But, as our captain is fond of reminding us, the man who underestimates his enemy is usually the first to die.

There were some humans among the companies sent to fight the goblin army. Not many, less than thirty, but good men all. Men who train with us train as we do, in body, mind and spirit. We, all of us, human and elf, take the same oath as a soldier: to fight with honour and live the same; to crave peace but not to the detriment of freedom; to protect those who need protection; to reap justice to those who sow injustice. Not all who come seeking training are accepted; most, in fact, are turned away, no matter how much gold they offer.

The ones who had been training with our army over the last few months were all volunteers who would be paid for their services. They, of course, were told that this was not their war and were free to leave, that no one would think ill of them. They stayed to a man. One even joked grimly that the battle would be their final test. So it would be for all of us...

*The two great armies swell together, the goblin ranks cut down already by a third from the traps and archers. I am not in the front ranks, so it takes a few minutes of moving with and amongst my comrades before a pocket of enemy foot soldiers begin mingling with us. A young goblin, hardly old enough to hold a sword, clumsily swings at me. An easy parry, but my heart is beating so fast, the blood is pounding in my ears. This is no practice bout. One mistake and even the most inexperienced swordsman can kill. My opponents face is twisted in rage, but his eyes...his eyes hold fear. His eyes...are my eyes.*

We had marched at dawn. I watched as our king and his generals rode to the front of our lines. I had heard, probably from one of the humans, that kings and generals were often the first to ride out, but the last to enter into battle, if they entered into it at all. I knew that was not the case here. Our king would be as bloodied as any of us on the field, and he had the added responsibility of having to know of everything that went on around him, when to draw in, when to order a flanking movement, when to retreat. Beloved of the people, he would not ask of any of us what he himself would not do. In that regard, the people's loyalty to the king was a product of the king's loyalty to the people.

The first day of our march was uneventful. No one spoke much. Perhaps it was that, as so many of us had never been in battle before, conversation had no meaning. None of us wanted to speak openly of our fears but it was there on our faces. The older men, veterans of countless battles, wore faceless masks that did not show what they felt. But it is hard to disguise the eyes.

The first day's march, and the ensuing night, was uneventful. On the second day, however, it rained steadily. The weather matched our spirits. No man marched happily into war, knowing that he may never see his family again, that even if he survives many of his comrades will not. No sane man, anyway.

We reached our destination late that evening. Through the rain, we had marched to a smaller clearing south of the Tuhor. While some men stayed to make camp, the rest of us marched ahead to the clearing, the site we had chosen to stop our enemies, and busied ourselves with the preparations for the next day's battle. Steady reports from our scouts indicated that the enemy would reach us by the following afternoon. Apparently, the goblin armies were traveling slower than expected, but they were not trying to hide their approach. Indeed, given their size, that would have been nearly impossible.

Worse than the marching was the waiting. At least in marching, we were busy. With waiting, there were only the thoughts of the coming day to occupy our minds. It was hard, looking around ourselves, knowing that, even should we survive the coming battle, many of our comrades, our friends, our brothers, would not. I found myself attempting to strike deals with the gods for the safety of those most dear to me. If this one or that one is to be killed, take me rather than them. As if my meager life could be traded for so many that did not deserve death.

Foolish, in retrospect. It is not the gods who choose war; it is man. It is each man who chooses to fight, and thus it is each man's destiny that is fulfilled. The gods have no destiny, and therefore watch ours as a man watches ants busy themselves about a sand hill.

*Another clumsy swing and this time I disarm him. The fear in his eyes spreads to his face, and in the brief moment from the time his sword leaves his hand to the time that my sword enters his body, the look becomes one of pleading, and, as my first kill falls to his knees, his eyes bore into mine not with a look of sorrow or anger, nor fear nor loathing...*

*but of betrayal.*

That evening, once again two companies were chosen to split watch. Mine was one of them. I was in the group who were to take first watch, giving over the responsibility just after moonrise in the cloudy night sky. We positioned ourselves at our stations, blending as we were taught with our surroundings. Each of us carefully marked the man to our left's position. The man to my left was a darker shadow against the silhouette of a tree. My own silhouette was part of that of a rocky outcropping. The man to my right would have marked me as such. Should I be killed by a scout or a spy's blade, any change in that silhouette would alert him to danger.

The night wore and finally the moon made its silent appearance in the night sky, an indistinguishable patch of dim light fighting to make itself seen through the clouds blocking its full glory. My replacement joined me on the rock plateau on which I stood, and after a moment, I retreated silently. There was no sense of relief in the ending of my duty that evening. Most times, guard duty is done in the relative safety our home city. This was my first time doing so away from the protection of the walls surrounding Sitoria Aeraemel, but even as I padded silently away from the man taking my place, and without the constant vigilance of guard duty to turn my thoughts from the inevitableness of the events in the coming day, I found myself dwelling once again on all that might happen.

*In the fraction of a moment that it takes for the life to drain from the young goblin's eyes, as his blood drains from his body, an eternity slips past. My mind balks at the contemplation of my actions. I can't but keep staring at the sword in my hand, wet and sticky.*

*I have extinguished a life.*

*I have taken a soul.*

I was spared further worry. From my left, as I headed back into the camp, came the familiar wolf-gait stride of one of the humans, a ranger named Kel. He saw me, of course, as I was the man he had marked on his left during our shared guard duty. I had not known that he, too, had been chosen, for sentry duty.

He nodded. Like most humans, he felt the need to acknowledge the presence of another. I returned the gesture, unlike most elves, who would consider it beneath them to show a human that he cared that his presence was acknowledged. This must have made an impression upon him, because he altered his path slightly to intersect my own, and fell into stride next to me.

Though late and I being tired, his presence, strange as it was, comforted me, somehow. We walked in silence for a few moments.

"You're good," the statement was one expected from a superior, not another recent trainee. In fact, he was stealthy enough for a human, but as a sentry, none could get past him in our training. "A bit more practice, and you'll be one of the best. Nothing to worry about now with this goblin rabble, but against a higher beast like a human or a well-trained orc..."

He spat on the ground, but left the rest unsaid. I myself was struck silent. This was more words than I had ever heard him utter, and his first to me. I might have argued the fact with him, had I already not acknowledged to myself that, as a sentry, he was best amongst those who had been training.

In his hands, he was turning over and over some small item on a chain of silver. We continued walking in silence, me searching for something to say, and him, seemingly contemplating something else entirely.

*An angered shriek brings time back to its full movement not too late for me to dodge another sword strike, this one with more skill and confidence than that of the goblin boy. I turn to face my next foe, another goblin, whose face was twisted in the same rage as his comrade's had been. His eyes, though, hold no fear. Only more anger, more rage, than that of his countenance. More than rage, his eyes hold hatred. He growls a single word before he launches a fury of blows that nearly takes the sword from my hand. I back away. This almost proves fatal, as I falter over the dead goblin's outstretched sword, as the more deadly one's next blow rains down toward my head.*

Without looking up, the ranger commented, "you don't seem like most other elves I've met."

This struck me, coming from a human. I stopped.

"How many elves have you met?" It seemed the obvious retort.

He grinned, "See, right there. Any other elf would have gone off his cart at the mere thought of being different. You took that in stride."

At first I did not understand the notion of the cart, why I would be off of it, and why I would be on one in the first place....and I, not being very talkative in the most social of circumstances, was again left speechless.

"See, there again," he continued. "Any elf I've known would have turned crimson by now, sputtering threats about teaching me manners and all that. You are different."

I was not sure where this was going, so I could only frown at him. He seemed quite mad. We continued walking in silence, I angling towards my part of the camp, consciously quickening my pace, with the hope that he would break off towards his. He kept up.

Finally, I spoke. "It's very late, and I'm tired. Tomorrow...later today...there will be...much to do." I was going to say "a battle", but I balked at the words.

"Yes", he nodded. "Much to do. That whole fighting to the death thing. Listen, we're likely to be deployed in the same area, and once the fighting starts, small companies like ours are really going to be one mixed up into one big mass of killing and dying. We'll end up near each other; I'll make sure of that. I need you to do something for me."

Was he truly as mad as he seemed? Do something for him? In the middle of a battle, when our thoughts are going to be occupied with dispatching the enemy and trying not to die? This was absurd! Why was he bothering me when I should be trying to get the last mortal sleep I may have?

A bluff, in retrospect, and one not even spoken. I would not sleep this night, not with all the thoughts that would haunt me about the coming day. Still, I could not see what I could do for this human in the thick of the battle.

"I need you...to keep me alive. And I'll do the same for you." He stopped and looked at me in the eyes. "You elves are great fighters. You aren't as strong as most human warriors the same size, but you use your weapons to their maximum potential. Light swords, not the massive blades that humans and dwarves use, and like it's a part of your arm! And speed....what speed! I've never seen any being draw a bow or swing a blade faster than an elf. But when you fight in armies such as this, you fight as automatons....together, but not together. You need to have someone to watch your back, and you need to be watching out for the backside of someone else. That'll keep you alive in a fight! You need to trust those you with whom you fight. Without that...you may live through a battle or two, but in the long run, you're dead."

Death. I am not afraid to die. A man only has to have lost someone dear to them to know that, were it up to him, the dear one would be alive and, because death needs to take someone, he would be dead. Death, for those who know him, is not feared for oneself.

"What are you talking about, human?" It's not that I did not understand, but that I did not want to contemplate further on such things. I wanted my peace, my solitude, my thoughts, before the daylight took everything that I could hope to control.

"I'm speaking plainly enough", he stood somberly. "I watch your back, you watch mine. We both survive to fight another day. If one of us dies, it won't be for lack of trying. And I am human, but my name is Kel."

My earlier thought returned: This was absurd.

"Why don't you ask one of your own kind? Surely, one of them would be a better choice."

"I could trust most of them to get us both killed. I've seen you in practice. You're good. You're studious. You don't seek to swing your sword, you seek to master it."

"Surely, there are other men, elves and human, much better than me, no matter my zeal."

"There are. None of them I trust."

"Why trust me?"

"Because, as I said...you're different. I thought that we covered that already. If you give your word, you'll keep it, whether to another elf, or a human, likely even to an orc, under pain of death." Again, he spat at the mention of the word orc. "Look, I am just asking that we try to keep each other alive until the next sundown. Motives aside, surely you can see the logic in that request? "

"What are your motives?" I stopped suddenly and asked. It was clear that there was something that I was not grasping, and equally clear that this human, this Kel, was the only one who could tell me.

"I can tell that you are not one to enter into an agreement lightly. Look, I can't give you the whole story, not now. I just need to stay alive, to live through this battle so that I can fight another one. You keep me alive to the morrow, and I will tell you what you want to know."

"Why are you here?" My head was spinning. Why me? I could not think, but again, I could not help but think. Deep down, I...I realized that I was afraid. Not of my death, no. So many back home depended on us winning this battle. So many friends, family, kinsmen....many would die in this battle. Those surviving will go back to face widows, orphans, flowery speeches and somber burials. But our people would be saved. This man didn't care about any of that; he only cared about the next battle. The next fight...

I was suddenly angry. My voice raised, I continued, "You only care for the battle? Living through this one to fight the next one? These are my kin, my friends, my lands for which we fight. My concern cannot be to keep you alive so you can live to fight another...day?"

He glared at me, grinding my tirade to a puzzled question before it had barely begun. Through gritted teeth, he sucked in a deep breath, and then closed his eyes, and breathed out a single, long breath, and paused before sucking in another.

"It's late, and clearly, you are not the one I thought you would be. Have no fear, elf", he hissed this last word, and paused before continuing, "I will fight for your kin, your friends, your land as hard as you will. I hope that I will see you on the other side of the battle."

He turned and strode off, not wolf-gaited, but with long angry strides. He collided briefly with another elf, but simply ignored the glare he received as off he stormed.

I found my confusion turning back to something akin to anger. It was not at his reaction and abrupt end of the conversation. In fact, I was glad to be rid of him. I believe that I was actually upset at the implication that I was not the one he thought me to be, and this, I did not understand. Further, I did not understand why I cared what a human...a mad human, at that...thought of me.

As I stared after him, my eye was drawn to a metal thing on the ground. Stooping, I picked it up. It was the object of the mad human's attention when he first engaged me in conversation. I held up a long silver chain, and at its end, a hinged pendant of sorts. The detail was very fine. Not elfish made, though. Possibly dwarf.

Too late to go after him, I tucked the item into the breast pocket of my tunic and turned toward my corner of the camp. I hoped that it was not part of some battle charm or good fortune ward. Humans are notoriously credulous of every omen, every portent, every auspice that their imagination tells them bodes well or doom. As he had wished upon me, I hoped that I could give it back to him on the other side of the battle.

*The blow does not land, but a loud clang of steel-on-steel rings right next to my ear. It would have been too late, but I roll away to safety, and look up to see the human, Kel, forcing the goblin's sword away from where my head had been and back to a fully standing position. He is saying something to me about not dying, and that what I have is precious to him.*

*The goblin is surprised to have another foe, before properly dispatching the last, but still has the presence of mind to leap backwards, to avoid a sudden slash of Kel's blade towards his exposed midriff. The fall and the ringing in my ear disorients me for a few moments, but I can see yet another enemy, an orc, moving in behind Kel, occupied with the goblin, to land an unsuspecting blow. I try to move towards him, but I can't find my footing and I fall, swinging. My blade bites into flesh and as I crash down again to the bloodied and muddied earth, a yelping figure falls face-first in front of me. I cannot turn fast enough as I start to roll around to see a wide blade fall towards my head, as if slowed to a fraction of its speed. I don't understand, as it is moving so very slowly, why I cannot dodge it. A sudden, dull pain, and then...darkness.*

I put from my mind my interaction with the human, and lay down on my sleeping roll to at least attempt to rest before the day's coming turmoil. Despite my misgivings of sleep, the days march and battle preparations overtook me. I nodded into a restless slumber and several times awoke to the dark around me. Each time, I listened for sounds of battle or stirrings of my comrades, but there was nothing, and after a few moments I let my eyes close again, slipping back into the restlessness. Finally, a strong hand roughly shook my shoulder and the familiar tones of one of my kinsmen advised me that scouts put the army only leagues away. Before I started stirring from my bed roll, he had moved on to the next slumbering figure, rousing them in the same way.

The next short while was consumed with quickly packing away our bedding and moving our companies into formation. I did not spot Kel, and so I left his keepsake tucked into my tunic, again hoping that it was not some kind of charm he would miss in the battle to come, but at the same time, glad to avoid at least that confrontation again.

As we entered formation, the King rode out in front. Although he addressed us briefly, we were too far back to properly hear his words of encouragement, but we threw up our arms in defiant cheer along with everyone else when we saw him do it, before pulling his mount around and facing the open field in the direction from which the goblin army would pour from the woods on the far side.

This time, the waiting was a palpable demon on our shoulders. Seconds crept into minutes, and then the minutes crawled towards an hour. Some of the humans broke rank and sat on their haunches, or put a knee to the ground, to the frowns of their superiors. Battles are never told this way, I thought. It is always the regaling speech and then turning to fight!

Then, we heard it...a long, low rumble, at first, exactly as thunder, but then, too long to be thunder. As it got louder, I realized that it was not thunder, but the steady beat of war drums. Others had come to this realization, as well, and commanders began ushering their charges into proper formation. Eyes towards the tree line, we waited, each passing moment giving rise to louder and louder pounding, until the beating of our hearts and the beating of the drums were indistinguishable.

Suddenly, the beating stopped, and for a moment, I thought that my heart had, as well. The silence became deafening for a few moments more, and then the beat of the drums was replaced by the screech of ten thousand goblins, orcs and trolls that poured from between the trees.

*There is no more sound. The dull pain remains as I become aware again of darkness, and then again of the rain. I am slow to realize that the darkness is because my eyes are shut. So heavy, it takes effort to force them open, and then the dull pain becomes a piercing agony of sun light. Fighting back the searing waves of pain, and the nausea that follows, I force myself to look about, as I realize the vulnerability of my position. But I am alone. The tide of battle has moved off, or maybe subsided, and the only things around me are the dead bodies of the enemies. The one I killed is covered in a mix of dripping blood and wet dirt, his face pushed into the soft mud, eyes still staring. The second goblin, the one who uttered that word, lies disemboweled, the anger now frozen on his face, eyes dull but defiant. The orc, whose wide sword is next to me, is practically missing a foot and lies on his back, a dagger sticking neatly from his chest. His hands grasp at the hilt, but there is no strength in his dead arms to pull it from his heart. Farther away, I can see the bodies of others, goblins, orcs and men, both human and elf. None are moving.*

*The death and carnage I witness this day haunts me. Our forces fought with precision and bravery, but the enemy fought with a savagery that has no regard for life, ours or theirs. I saw goblin and orc armed with little more than sharpened sticks and the blades of broken daggers, whose hilts were naught but ragged cloth wrapping one end, charge into thrusting swords and spears. When an enemy did gain the advantage and takes down one of our soldier, he continued slashing and beating the fallen man beyond the ebb of life, sometimes rending limb from the already-dead in his ferocity, heedless of the tide of battle around them. Countless enemy were thus killed unawares, while assailing dead men whose final acts are to distract the relentless and merciless to their demise.*

*Each breath I take burns my chest as though it was on fire, and I realize that some of my ribs are broken. Cradling my chest against the pain, I feel the slight bulge of the pendant beneath my tunic. With my other hand, I pull out the long silver chain. The sun, low on the horizon, peaking beneath the thinning rain clouds, glints off the pendant as it twisted back and forth. It was precious to him, he had said. He knew that I had it, but he did not retrieve it from my unconscious form after our combat. In the distance, I now see men moving among the dead, looking for survivors of the battle. I tuck the chain back into my tunic and, with no small amount of pain, retrieve my sword from the ground next to the orc's wide blade. I wince as I kneel beside his body and, with effort, pull the dagger from his chest. A small rivulet of blood leaks from the wound and is slowly diluted by the rain. With the dagger tucked into my belt, I hobble towards the men, leaning on my sword as an old man leans on his cane.*

*The word that goblin uttered, I learn later, means "brother" in the enemy's language. His brother, then, was the first goblin that I had killed. He attacked with the ferocity I saw at the outset of the battle and doubtless I would have fallen to the same fate as the hapless men I witnessed rent asunder.*

*Kel, it seems, kept his word despite, or perhaps to spite, me not giving mine. He kept the enemy's blade from my neck, but in doing so left himself open to attack from another. That I did not die from the first swing was fool's luck, as the orc caught me with the flat of his blade instead of the keen. Senseless, I did not see what happened next. Kel must have killed the older brother and severed the foot of the orc, incapacitating him before embedding a dagger into his heart.*

*I did not give my oath to him, but he did save my life. Since coming to my aid, I have not seen him. He did not return with the remnants of our company, and I did not see him amongst the dead in the area when I recovered my senses. The battle as a whole encompassed a significant area, so he may have been lost elsewhere, but somehow, I don't believe this is true.*

*When he saved my life, I heard him say that what I had was precious to him. The hinged pendant in my tunic must be it. My resolve is now to find him and return it to him, and offer to him my sword and my protection, if he will have it. My debt will be paid.*