

Introduction

I am an interbreed, half man and half ogre, and no maker of chronicles by nature, but of a certain necessity. I take this testimony up at the behest—nay, the nagging—of my wives. They are daughters of men, and that means they love stories better than most races. They have heard so many of my tales, that I suppose they think others of their race will be eager to hear them. Perhaps they believe it is time for the “monster” to tell his side of the story. Perhaps they believe my tales will help explain why they married me, an interbreed, an *ogrën*.

So, I write to please them, and perhaps myself as well. For there is nothing like my story: ancient truth, bold tale, honest memories. History laid bare. I shall on some points feel their wrath, these wives of mine, for I have endeavored to lay out all things, good and evil, wise and foolish, as plainly as I am able. But I could not refuse their request in any case, for my wives are sisters, and though daily rivals in my household they will always band together against me in matters upon which they agree. They are as relentless as they are large and brutish—or at least they are to their own kind, to mankind. I, however, find them very satisfactory, and as an *ogrën* I myself have no right to speak disdainfully of anyone’s appearance. Thus, we seem to match nicely. I decidedly prefer them to ogresses, who can never be trusted. Not that any ogress would have an interbreed such as myself. We are of no use—we hold no promise of position, honor, or status. Suits me just as well, so there is the balance.

I am ancient by the reckoning of my wives, the years of men being much longer than animals but far, far less than ogres. I have inherited this beneficent feature (and some others) from my ogrish side. Few of the men with whom I now trade are more than one hundred and fifty winters. I had passed many times that number before most of them were born. For my part, I no longer count my life in years, but in chapters and stories and consequences. But my age makes me an object of curiosity to men, for I have lived much of what now fills their legends. Thus, I write a chronicle and a story; a history, but also a myth. For it is said that hindsight is sharp as the eye of a hawk, but I know it is made dull by loves and hates, victories and defeats, joys and pains. It is only as sharp as one can endure.

Indulge me, my wives, if I linger much over things of ogrekind, reminiscing of their ways and passions since little is truly known of those long-past times: the power and terror the First Race held for all others; their unquenchable lust for status and position; their fierce jealousy of metalcraft; the politics and rivalries of the Houses of the Four Clans that eventually led to their ruin. Men know only the stories of solitary ogres—vicious brutes—faded and poor tales, not worthy of the glory of the days of the Clans.

A formal introduction is required then. Let the reader pause if any listen; let these words be spoken aloud though no other be present: I am Delk the Uneven, Delk the Og, Delk the Interbreed. Delk the Terror of the Wilderlands. Delk the Lord of the Fourth Metal, the Lord of Bronze. And I must begin my story many hundreds of years ago, before this present time of men. I must begin where the course of my existence changed; where a singular event pushed me out of balance, but indeed toward my destiny. I must begin my tale as an interbreed in the strength and arrogance of his youth, and that most certainly means a fight.

Prologue

Lying comfortably in the hollow of a decaying tree in the lush forest that grew out of the sandy ground, I could smell the tribesmen—six, perhaps seven—well before I could hear their clumsy approach. The tribes of men who claimed the deep forests prided themselves on stealth and cunning, on hunting and fighting. They fancied themselves the masters of the wilderlands. But I was more so. I am man but also ogre, and I am beyond their skills, their strengths, and their ferocity.

Night had just fallen, but the fire I had made in the small clearing was already glowing and dancing. A fire meant entirely for the distraction of fools.

Fire was important to stone-chipping tribes, especially in the perpetual dankness of the ancient forests where it was hard to make and hard to keep. I could take my ease with or without fire in the early spring, though the nights could be cold and wet. Men thought differently. They found comfort in the magic of fire.

The approaching tribesmen paused just outside the clearing I had chosen and waited for some time until they thought that no fire-builder would return. Then they gladly made camp and settled in for the deep darkness of the night. I listened long enough for them to become lax, as the arrogant are apt to do.

I moved noiselessly from my place, staying downwind. I, for all my massive misshapen stature, crept up to the small band without a

sound. As I stepped from the darkness into their midst, I slammed my spike-covered fist into the chest of a large man who had been stoking their cooking fire. It did not require my full strength, or the iron knuckler I wore to drop the fool, but it made the point so quickly to the rest. The man reeled from the blow which tore off the animal hide draped over his body, leaving him a gasping, half-naked heap. The remaining half dozen tribesmen stood frozen.

I surveyed the remaining men. Some glanced about for their weapons, others stared transfixed; one released his water. I often took advantage of shock, the pause of confusion and fear, the racing thoughts and the tightening stomach.

“Delk...” one of them managed to stammer.

I removed my helmet, as their eyes widened. The twisted arrangement of my facial features belied my mere twenty-five summers—an ageless monster, awe-inspiring, towering above the terrified group. In that moment, I must have seemed to be the size of a full-blooded ogre.

The tribesmen had made no effort to fight or flee as I revealed my face in the firelight. I exploited their indecision, speaking in the plain tones of their people.

“You have acted foolishly. You have raided and killed my trading partners, the Liaux, the men of the river.” I, Delk the *Ogrën*, paused to let the knowledge of my alliance with the men of the Great River sink in. The wilderlands tribes could be dull, but I knew how to help them grasp their predicament.

“In doing so, you have made war on me.” I shifted my weight and reached behind my back with my left hand.

Without immediate threat, I drew my heavy fighting spike from its fleece-lined scabbard strapped to my back. It was a three-sided spike of polished iron, smooth mostly, about the length of a man’s leg, with a perfectly sharp point. Its tapered body thickened at the handle into a rounded, leather-wrapped rod with a barbed pommel.

It was my own design, crafted by a smythie from the Clan of the Sun, far to the east. He had done a superb job, balancing it to become

an extension of my double-jointed left arm; an elegant tool allowing me to pierce armor of leather, wood, and bronze, or to strike heavily as though wielding a bludgeon. Metalcraft was yet unknown to this tribe and my spike must have seemed a magical thing to them in the firelight. I slowly extended it, pointing at each and every man.

“Make known to your people that the men of the Great River are my allies. I will seal it this night in blood.”

I waited to see if they would grasp the choice I was offering them. Only the gurgle of the fallen man and the crackling of the fire kept us aware of time. At length, two of the tribesmen seemed to come to the same crazed decision simultaneously. They both made a mad rush toward me from opposite sides of the fire wielding their sad stone weapons. The scent of their desperation hung in the night air.

Their companions remained motionless except for their eyes, like a pack of dogs waiting to delight in the spoils or flee into the friendly darkness. The man to my left had barely taken two steps when I broke his neck by a single blow of my spike. My left arm is truly the weapon that no one anticipates. It appears awkward and stiff with its second elbow, until I strike. Then it is a coiled serpent.

The second attacker would serve another purpose, I decided. I wanted his death to become part of the legend that surrounded Delk the Uneven. I allowed him to reach me, without concern for the wild swinging of his flint axe. I gave him every opportunity to kill me. He was large by their standards and put all his might into every swing while I remained where I stood, dodging in a deft manner that would live in the stories of any who survived this night. Soon he was breathing heavily, as much in desperation as exhaustion. I wanted him to regret his decision. I wanted him to fear me before I made his name—if he even had one—part of the stories of Delk the Interbreed that would spread among his kind.

He gathered strength for one final onslaught but was clearly disheartened that his fellows stood aside. When he finally lunged and buried the roughly chipped blade into the tree just behind me, I grabbed his throat with my massive right hand engulfing his neck

from chin to shoulders. He clawed at me vainly, trying to pry my hand loose, tearing his flailing arms open against the spikes of the knuckler surrounding my tightening fist. He began grunting a single word over and over—perhaps a curse or a plea, or the name of his woman or of his god. It did not matter. I held him just off the ground as I slowly choked the life from him.

Then, dropping him, I danced about the fire as the remaining men wisely scattered into the dark, no two in the same direction. The stories would grow now, but even the truth would have been sufficient for my purposes. For a time, none of this brutish, random and wasteful tribe—the lowest breed of men—would interfere with my trade or attack the outposts of the Liaux.

But only for a time.

Forest tribes were slow learners and I knew I would need to repeat this lesson for others. These wildermen were troublesome—not so much as the *castoffs* of ogrekind, shunned from their Clan, driven mad by their isolation—but a distraction nonetheless. I had worked too long and too hard carving out a place for myself between the worlds of my birth, and neither man nor ogre was going to take it away from me. Or so I believed.

Chapter One

The light forest breeze blew mildly, carrying the faint scent of rain to come as I drifted in and out of a light sleep—the habit of a survivor. To be alone in the wilderlands meant knowing what can kill you, and what cannot; what is worth killing, and what should be left to its own devices.

Thus, despite my surprise when I smelled the shire smythie approaching shortly after dawn, I did not stir from my comfortable spot. I could judge his distance from his foul burnt odor and soon I heard his heavy steps through the undergrowth, though I imagine he considered himself to be stealthy. I could not fathom what would take him so far from the Great Isles, away from his beloved forge.

It was something odd to be sure, and either some great reward had enticed him or some great threat had driven him to make such a journey. I waited as patiently as I could (though my curiosity was beginning to burn within) while he lumbered toward my camp.

The smythie was much too pleased with himself when he finally arrived and stood hovering over me like an immense tree with two massive trunks.

“Ha!” roared the charred and grimy creature, assuming he would startle me awake. “It is said Delk is so cunning! Thinks no one is so smart as to surprise him! And here stands a common tradesogre! Are you so careless these days, og?” His breath blew over me hot and acrid as he leaned close to my face; his panting reminded me of the bellows from his forge.

“If you are still breathing, smythie, it is because I wish it so,” I replied without opening an eye. It took a moment for his challenged wit to work out my meaning. Then he laughed all the harder and took a seat across from the orange coals of my smoldering fire.

“You are the same Delk that I remember!” the grimy ogre said in honest amusement. “I should keep my tongue better ‘round a *slayer*.

I knows better than most 'bout you!"

The wits of the smythie may have been sparse, but his talent at the forge more than made up for it. He was an outstanding craftsogre who had designed and crafted my armor and *knuckler*. The behemoth leaned back, smirking as he picked up the spike-covered glove and sniffed it.

"I see you are using these toys still," he muttered wryly.

It fit my outsized right hand perfectly, but in the smythie's massive hands it looked no larger than a cup.

"Is that how you describe your work these days?" I spun about to extend my feet toward the embers. "Are you now the shire toy maker?"

"I do what feeds me, as always," he shot back, a little too quickly out of sorts even for an ogre. His four enormous nostrils flared as he examined the weapon he had fashioned for me long ago. I believe he was pleased that it was so well kept. He had no proper name that I knew of, and was known only as *smythie*, after the manner of the lower born ogres. His trade was his name and his life.

I could sense his pride as he rolled the *knuckler* about, and though I burned to know what had brought him here, I did not want to speak too soon. Curiosity always puts one at a disadvantage. Clearly a weakness I inherited from my human side.

"Examine the armor if you like," I offered.

The tradesogre cast an annoyed glance at me for guessing his thoughts, then stood and took one ground-jarring step to the base of the fallen tree where I had laid my prized possession. He took it up, strikingly odd in the tenderness of his handling. The shire smythie had done an outstanding piece in that armor to be sure. I was not easy to gauge in any way, so fitting me took unusual study, and I had paid handsomely for it.

As an ogrën, an interbreed, I am truly unlike man or ogre; or even the others of my own kind—an unpredictable union of the races of my birth. I am twisted and tall, fearful and awkward to the eye, towering above men (though far from the stature of an ogre) and my muscles do

not always contract and harden in the same shape each time I move.

To further complicate the smythie's task, my right arm is the girth of a man's waist from shoulder to wrist, and a hand to match. My left arm seems more suited to my frame, but is jointed by two elbows giving me a range of motion unexpected by my adversaries. My hands and feet are ogrish, with four digits each rather than man's more dexterous five. My legs are knotted oaks, and near enough to each other in shape and size to carry me well, but not without creating an unpredictable gait.

As I move, it appears that I am teetering and unsteady, and when I fight, it makes it difficult to anticipate and even harder to strike. In all respects, I am uneven.

The smythie had spent weeks measuring, cursing, and puzzling over my frame and the unpredictable arrangement of my flesh. But metalcraft was a skill this otherwise dull-witted giant possessed in surprising measure, linking plate and mail and leather with gears and links that accounted for my movements. I had given him the copious amounts of praise—and payment—he expected for this final product.

My armor was stronger than any metal work mankind could dream of and it rode me like the skin of a snake when I fought, but could be arranged neatly into a bundle and strapped to my back when I needed to travel at speed. A remarkable piece and completely unlike the armor ogres wear, which was far heavier and less fluid. He grunted his approval as he remembered the long days of his labor.

“Well made, smythie. It has served me without fail. Without a doubt, I am still alive and here speaking with you now because of your craft and skill.” His massive face cracked with a smile that looked almost painful in its rearrangement of his features. Flattery can be as good as a tankard of ale to a tradesogre.

“None like it ever, og,” he agreed, congratulating himself. Then his smile faded as he recalled he was far from his forge and the tools that crafted this marvel. “I didn't come all this cursed way and miss many a breakfast to talk of past works. You are needed. Needed by my new master.” He scowled slightly as he spoke.

Needed? I was completely taken aback though I did my best to contain my reaction, hoping the smythie would not be perceptive enough to read past my twisted face. I chose to sidestep the immediate question, holding my curiosity at bay.

“And who is the fortunate House that adds your skills?” I asked as casually as I could manage.

Growling to clear his throat, he replied, “The House of Bone.” Then, according to custom, he spat in my direction sharing the odor of the House he represented. Then he added, “In service to Thegn Mygh the FearMaker.”

The smythie had done well for himself! A thegn was a prince among ogrekind and they were rare indeed as there were only Four Clans, and only four Houses within each. And in those sixteen Houses were only a handful of ogres whose lineage, ruthlessness, and martial skill had earned them that position.

I complimented the smythie for such an honored attachment (one well above his station). He merely grunted. Despite his newfound status, being sent on errands instead of working his craft clearly annoyed him.

“An excellent gain for you, it seems, smythie,” I prodded. “Mygh is a clever one from reputation and may be named Designate to Lord Bone one day. You will do well to serve him until the House bears his name.” Ruthless as thegns may be, they are not all cunning. If the reports held true, Mygh the FearMaker was both.

The smythie huffed dismissively.

“His House will do as long as I get what’s promised.” What was promised, I assumed, was richer food and drink, and a title within the House, not just a tradesogre’s attachment. Perhaps even a proper name. The smythie had a serious eye on moving beyond his station. Position meant control and that meant everything to an ogre, even to a shire smythie. I liked control as well, but for different reasons.

I was genuinely intrigued, though I could not imagine why a thegn would have any need of an ogrën, but I did not want a rehearsed speech; I needed the truth. I stood rather pointedly, and

walked over to my pack and pulled out a carefully tied package so the smythie could see it in the growing morning light and more importantly, detect its aroma. I slowly unwrapped the delicacy—a fermented *strixix* egg. It glistened in the dawn like a giant black pearl. The smythie exploded with surprise.

“How did you manage that?!” he roared, dumbfounded. I knew the powerful smell would leave him off balance.

“I’m an ogrën you fool. We trade.”

Though he knew I ranged far and wide, he could not believe that I possessed such a delicacy here in the deep forest. He breathed in deeply with four greedy nostrils.

“What exactly am I needed for?” I inquired casually as the smythie gazed longingly at the noxious treat.

Impatient to sample this prize, the smythie blurted out, “Mygh needs to find an *ogress*. She is called by Avoxet. She’s run off.”

Now it was my turn to be dumbfounded. What need would a thegn have to *find* an *ogress*? They would all be scheming to get a thegn’s attention and Mygh would have his pick from among their Lodges. Ogresses, though far smaller in stature, were more than a match for any ogre in ambition, always calculating and plotting for their future positions. The notion that one would run away from a contract with one of Mygh’s standing was absurd. True, ogresses were mischievous, sometimes roaming the lands of men gathering items to make potions and the like, but for one to simply run away? It was unheard of; inexplicable.

“She has run off from him, see?” the smythie repeated. “And so, offends him by her absence. He wants her back. But no one is to know, see?” He paused as thoughtfully as he was able. “Because his position is not so sure as the other Houses think.” Were his wits about him, he would never have spoken of the weakness of his own master, but he could focus on nothing but the ebony egg.

I handed him the savory treasure, and he received it with trembling and delight. He took his time sniffing and reveling in the egg’s pungent wonder, until he could no longer control his

impulse to devour it.

The giant smythie groaned happily as the egg did its intoxicating work.

“Gots nothing to wash it down with, then?” He looked like a dog, hoping to receive another hand-out from its master. I tossed him a nearly full skin of my own brew, and watched as he guzzled half its contents without taking a breath.

“Careful, smythie,” I warned him. “Between that egg and my drink? You might just forget why you came.” And indeed, the effect of both were already evident from the foolish grin across his ember-scarred face.

“Ogresses of her standing be wrapped in nonsense more than half the time. Goes to the head it all does,” the smythie rasped contemptuously, slurring his words, his head bobbing up and down. “Shuule was topped out, see? No place to rise up to. Done. She couldn’t see it, though. She was an odd one—can’t have that one, don’t want this one! So, now Mygh is afraid! Ha! The FearMaker is afraid!” The smythie snorted at his own joke.

Though I did not grasp his full meaning, this was clearly House politics of a high nature; dangerous to become involved with. But I was stung with blistering curiosity, a foible I have fought all my life—sometimes, as in this instance, without success. It is too expensive a luxury for a survivor. It throws one out of balance. But that was where I found myself as the smythie fell soundly asleep.