

The Chronicle of

Deik
The
Uneven

Jess MacCallum



IN ARDUA
TENDIT

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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 the tales I tell, that I suppose they think others of their kind will be interested 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 I use the language of their people to set down my tale though my wives cannot read, nor many of their immediate kin. But the scribes of their people can and so I know they—and many others—will have it read to them. And then we shall see if they are happy that they nagged me! 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 ugly—or at least they are to their own kind, to mankind. I, however, find them very satisfactory in appearance, and as an *ogrën* I myself have no right to speak disdainfully of

anyone's appearance. Thus we all seem to match nicely. I decidedly prefer them to ogresses, who can never truly be trusted, endlessly scheming, concocting potions and pursuing their own future positions within the Houses of the four Clans of ogrekind; not that any ogress would have an ogrën. We are of no use to them since we hold no promise of position, honor, or status in any House of ogrekind. Suits me just as well, so there is the balance. There *was* one ogress who turned out to be unique among her ilk, though a schemer in her own right, but her story will unfold with mine since they are inexorably interwoven.

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 witnessed, and 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.

To those who have never seen me, there must be a bit of explanation. I am twisted and tall, fearful and awkward to the eye, towering above men (though far from the stature of an ogre). A monster of the darkness and of dreams. More precisely, I am *uneven*: an unpredictable union of the races of my birth. My thicker left brow protrudes beyond the lip of my head covering. Likewise, my right cheekbone and jaw are heavy and rounded, giving me the appearance of one stung by bees and swollen into grotesque disproportion. My right arm hangs almost to the length of the left, both close to my knees, but with the girth of a man's waist from shoulder to wrist, and a hand to match. My left arm seems to fit

my frame better, but is jointed by two elbows giving me a range of motion unlike that of any creature I have encountered. My hands and feet are as that of ogrekind, with four digits each rather than man's more dexterous five. My legs are like 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 me difficult to anticipate and even harder to strike.

A product of two races, I am an outsider to both, impossible to blend readily with either. Such is the fate of the ogrën—a product of two worlds but without station, inheritance, or clan in either. I have known others like myself, and each has his own ways that go beyond the explanation of men or the interest of ogres; each has his own strengths, mental and physical, and each his own reason for enduring.

Let the reader and the listeners indulge me if I linger over things of ogrekind much, 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 vicious, solitary 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 the name 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 the present epoch of men. I must begin it where it changed the course of my existence and where a singular event first pushed me out of balance, but indeed toward my destiny. I must begin it as an interbreed in the strength and arrogance of his youth, and that most certainly means a fight.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a short time after the rainy season that I found myself just off the Great Isles, lying comfortably in the hollow of a decaying tree in the sparse forests that grew out of the sandy ground. The wet, earthy smell was pleasing and not so strong that I could not count the exact number of the band of tribesmen approaching my fire as night fell—a fire meant entirely for their distraction.

The tribes who claim the deep forests pride themselves on stealth and cunning, on hunting and fighting. They are the masters of the wilderlands. But I am more so. I am man but also ogre, and I am beyond their skills, their strengths, their ferocity. And I love to fight more than men can possibly stomach.

Fire used to fascinate some stone-working men in those days, especially in the perpetual dampness of the ancient mainland forests where it was hard to make and hard to keep. I made one to catch their attention, as I could take my ease with or without it in those spring days, though the nights could be cold and damp. Men think differently. They find comfort in the power of fire. The truth is that fire is like any other tool: only as strong as the hand that wields it.

The fire drew them, though I will give them credit for being wary. They were of the kind that believed they could take whatever they wished. They were young and arrogant. I was too, but for better reason. They waited for some time before coming into the light, watching the fire wane. But fearing it would die and they would lose it, they moved closer. And when they believed there

was no fire-starter to return, they gladly made camp and settled in for the long darkness of the night. They became lax as men are apt to do when they believe there is none greater than themselves about.

I moved noiselessly from my place, and staying downwind, I fixed my iron-spiked knuckler onto my right hand. Stepping almost into their midst, I slammed my spike-covered fist into the chest of the largest man dancing about the cooking fire. It really did not require my full strength, or the deadly knuckler I chose to drop the fool, but it made the point so quickly to the others. The man bounced off my fist, tearing away the animal hide loosely draped over his body like a poncho, leaving him a gasping, half-naked heap. The remaining six tribesmen stood frozen. I, for all my massive misshapen stature had slipped into the group without a sound, and downwind so my scent was beyond their reach. Their chieftain barely recognized me before my blow felled him. I looked steadily about at the remaining men. Some glanced about for their weapons, others stared transfixed. One released his water. I often used the advantage of terror, the pause of confusion and fear, the racing thoughts and the tightening stomach. But I hoped some would have the courage to remain and fight.

“D-Delk...” one of them managed to stammer hoarsely. Whether any of these had seen me before, I doubted, but I had something of a reputation even in my youth, and I could not be mistaken in any case. I am not easily forgotten as long as men dream of monsters. I slowly removed my twisted helmet to reveal my grossly uneven face. Their eyes widened. My shocking arrangement of facial features belied my mere twenty summers. (It often added decades, even centuries, to me in the tales that men told. As I aged, the opposite was true, hiding my great years behind the distraction of deformity, so there’s the balance.)

I had an awe-inspiring effect at that moment around the fire, towering above the terrified men by well more than two heads—at that moment I must have seemed to be the size of a full-blooded

ogre in their eyes.

The tribesmen had made no effort to fight or flee as I revealed my face in the firelight. Thus I took advantage of their indecision, speaking in the slow, rounded tones of their kind. “Men of the forest,” I intoned, “you have acted foolishly. You have raided and killed my chosen trading partners, the men of the river.” I, Delk the Uneven, paused to let the knowledge of my alliance with the men along the Great River sink in. The wilderlands tribes were not as astute as the men with whom I traded, but I knew how to help them grasp their predicament—they had made themselves my enemies.

“By this you have made war on *me*.” I shifted my weight and reached behind my back with my left hand. Slowly, without obvious threat, I drew the heavy fighting spike from its fleece-lined scabbard strapped to my back. It was a black, three-sided spike, 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 bar of iron. The barbed pommel was for close combat, collapsing the skulls of the unfortunate. On both of my left forearms I wore the oval shield of iron common to ogres. 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 toward them and said, “Make known to your people that the men of the Great River are my allies. I have sealed it this night in your chief’s blood.”

I waited to see if they would grasp the choice I was offering them. Only the gurgle of the fallen man and the sounds of the fire kept us aware of time. Finally, two of the half dozen seemed to come to the same crazed decision without speaking. The wrong decision. They grasped spear and ax and both made a mad rush toward me from opposite sides of the fire. I remember the slowness

of their attack in the flickering fire almost as much as the scent of their desperation.

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 was barely within striking distance when I broke his neck with a single blow of my fighting spike. My left arm is truly the weapon that no one understands or anticipates. It appears awkward and stiff with its second elbow, until I choose to strike. Then it is a coiled snake. The other attacker was not so mercifully released. I needed his death to become part of the lore that surrounds Delk the Uneven! I allowed him to reach me, without concern for his wildly swinging flint ax. I thought it a good example to the others to give him every opportunity to kill me. He was large by their standards, though not their chief, who had by now ceased to make even the grunts of death and lay wide-eyed, staring eternally into the flames. The ax-wielder put all his strength into every swing while I remained nearly unmoved, dodging in a deft manner that would live in the stories of any who chose more wisely. After several minutes 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 Og, spread among his kind for years to come. He tried to gather strength for one more onslaught but was clearly disheartened that his tribesmen stood aside. When he finally lunged and buried the roughly chiseled blade into the tree just behind me, I became bored. 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, but only succeeded in tearing his flailing arms open against the spikes of the knuckler surrounding my tightening fist. 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 of course, but even the simple truth would have been sufficient

for my purposes. For a time, none of these forest people would interfere with my trade or attack the outposts of the men of the river, the *Liaux*. But only for a time. Men are 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, those shunned from their Clan and driven mad by their isolation—but in those days I would tolerate no interruption in my freedom of trade from either. I had worked too long and too hard carving out a place for myself between the worlds of my birth, and neither one was going to take it away from me, or so I believed in those early years.

I always made my camps cautiously. Not that many are able to surprise me. My instincts are strong and my sense of smell stronger. From my ogress mother I inherited many such benefits: ogrekind's four nostrils, great strength and endurance, fearlessness, a talent for combat. And also a few weaknesses: a voracious appetite and, when unleashed, an equally voracious temper. From my human father's side came the strengths of men: quickness of perception, command of different tongues, an eye for craftsmanship, and above all, imagination. Not that the foraging, stone-wielders of the mainland exhibited many of these strengths. Like the men I had punished around my campfire, the wilderland tribes were the lowest breed of men—brutish, random and wasteful, squandering opportunities, destroying without any thought to positioning themselves to gain from their conquests. My ogrish side could never understand wasted opportunity for advancement or profit. Though I was not part of any ogre Clans, in my own way, position was just as important to me as to any clansogre. I would just have to create my own.

My chosen partners, the *Liaux*, were different from the forest tribes. They were a collection of peoples scattered up and down the Great River and its tributaries who traded and fished and created useful things. Though somewhat loosely related, the river was the true bond that held them together. In their language their name meant *children of water* and they simply referred to the Great River as *Mother*. They were as comfortable on water as on land—

something most ogres (and must I include myself) were not. Their settlements along the length of the Great River made them ideal partners for trade. They were quick to learn, compared to other men, and were accustomed to barter. Though they were mostly fishers, they also planted a few roots and vines that required little tilling since their soft copper tools were only effective in soft earth. Pigs and forest fowl wandered continually about their settlements feeding on scraps.

They were most adept at pottery. They made both large and small pots and beakers from the red-brown mud that lined the endless shores of their beloved *Mother*. These vessels bore a distinctive horizontal banding, sometimes incised with combs or ropes, and very durable, even for the acidic brew of ogres. This skill accounted for the bulk of the Liaux's trade up and down the Great River, carried in their long, thick-bottomed boats, which could carry considerable amounts of weight without danger of capsizing.

But what made them most eager to trade was their desire for copper. They knew something of its working but it was scarce. They produced for themselves only small items: fishing hooks, spears and eating tools, trinkets to display status or buy a wife. But they wanted more. I was always welcome among my chosen partners since I brought the kind of weapons and tools men could not make. I had long sensed that the Liaux wanted more than the items themselves; they wanted the secret of the making. But all were cautious with Delk the Uneven, even my trusted partners. No one pressed me for anything. I was Delk the Interbreed, Delk the Og. And I was not one to annoy. I maintained my balance with them and they with me.

Once the band of wildermen had scattered, I was alone with my fire, though as I have said, I did not require one. I dragged the bodies of the men I had slain far enough into the night to be sure nothing woke me chewing and rending, or dragging the bodies back to their pups.

I planned to return to the Liaux in a few days when I was sure

the forest tribes had pulled back far from any of their settlements. I knew these tribes could be persistent and slow to learn despite the fresh terror of this night. I had to make these trips across the vast forest between the Great Isles and the Great River almost every spring since the wildermen were nomadic, and inevitably newcomers would not know I was the guardian of the Liaux.

But there was one another reason I kept a watchful eye on these men. These small wilderlands tribes could be dangerous if they ever collected their strength and banded together. They could, given enough time, truly upset the balance I thrived on. I could not allow that. My trading partners were men too of course, but thinking men, who valued what I traded and sought a place for themselves as I did for myself. If the wildermen ever learned the power of gathering themselves, then the Liaux, would be overcome and I would have no place at all.

CHAPTER TWO

The light forest breezes blew mildly over my face, carrying the faint scent of rain to come as I drifted into a light sleep. Soon all thoughts became dreams. But I never slept deeply when I was away from my own keep. It is the habit of a survivor. To rest at all when you are alone in the wilds means knowing what will kill you, and what will not; what is worth killing, and what should be left to its own. So despite my shock, when I smelled the ogre smythie approaching shortly before dawn, I did not stir from my comfortable spot, or even open my eyes. I could judge his distance from his foul odor, which he did not attempt to hide by gauging the wind, and I could place his every step before he made it. I admit that from the instant I detected his burnt, pungent air I was stung by curiosity. I could not imagine what would take him so far from his shire on the Great Isles, and away from his beloved forge. This 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 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, thinking I slept. “Ha!” roared the charred and grimy smythie, assuming he would startle me awake. “It is said Delk is *so* cunning! Thinks no one is so quiet as to surprise *him*! And here stands a common smythie! Are you so careless these days, *og*?” His breath was hot and acrid as he leaned over my face and breathed on

me like the bellows from his forge. I showed no effect.

“If you are still breathing, smythie, it is because I wish it so.” I did not move or open my eyes while his challenged wit worked 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!” he 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 though not my fighting spike, which as I have said, came from a smythie from the Clan far to the east; there are no finer weapon-makers to be found amongst ogres. That point always provoked the smythie, as even the lower castes of ogres seek status, position, and reputation as earnestly as those who are high born. The behemoth leaned back, smirking as he picked up the knuckler with which I had killed the tribesmen the previous night. He sniffed it.

“I see you have been using these toys again,” he muttered wryly. It fit neatly about my larger right hand like a glove of iron, but it would not even accommodate half of the smythie’s massive paw.

“Is that how you describe your work nowadays?” I spun about to extend my feet toward the embers. “Have you become 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 secretly pleased that it was so well kept. He had no proper name that I knew of, and was only known as *smythie*, after the manner of the lower born tradesogres. His trade had become 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. “Examine the armor if you like,” I offered. He cast an annoyed glance at me for guessing his thoughts. He stood and took one ground-jarring step to the base of the fallen tree where I had laid my most prized possession. He took it up, strikingly odd in his tenderness. He had done an outstanding piece in that armor to be sure. I am not easy to gauge in any way, so fitting me took unusual study and I had paid handsomely for it. My muscles do not always contract and harden in the same shape each time I move. The smythie had spent hours measuring, cursing, and puzzling over the unevenness of my frame, and days studying the unpredictable arrangement of my flesh. Metalcraft was a skill this otherwise dull-witted creature possessed in surprising measure, linking plate and mail and leather with pistons and gears that accounted for my odd movements. I had given him the copious amounts of praise—and payment—he expected for this final product. My armor is stronger than any metal work mankind has ever dreamed of and it rides me like the skin of a snake as I fight, but packs neatly into a bundle that can be strapped upon my back when I need greater speed of travel. A remarkable piece and completely unlike the armor ogres wear, which is 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. Indeed I am 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 is as good as a tankard of ale to an ogre.

“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 for talk of past works. You are needed. Needed by my new master.” He scowled slightly at that comment. Clearly, being made an errand runner by this new master was not

an assignment the smythie appreciated.

“Needed?” I was completely taken aback though I did my best to contain my reaction. I hoped the smythie would not be perceptive enough to read past my twisted face. “And who is the fortunate House that adds your skills?” I asked as casually as I could. It was common for tradesogres to align themselves with a single House from decade to decade to gain advancement and status, and to secure their trade.

Growling to clear his throat, he said, “The House of Bone.” He announced it with a distinct tone of self-importance, then, according to ogre custom, he spit in my direction so I could smell the House he represented. Then to my further surprise he added, “In service to the Prime, Mygh the FearMaker.”

The smythie had done well. A Prime is a *prince* of ogrekind. Within each of the Four Clans are four Houses, and in each of these sixteen Houses are several whose lineage, ruthlessness, and fighting skill has earned them the title of *Prime*. Each of these in turn has his eye upon being named Designate, the heir to the ogreLord himself. There is no higher reward for the insatiable drive all ogres have for status and position than to become ogreLord. The House itself will bear his name. I complimented the smythie for such an honored attachment—one well above his station. He merely grunted. His attachment to a Prime was laudable, but being sent on errands instead of working his craft clearly annoyed him, though it was a connection any tradesogres would have envied no matter what was required.

“An excellent gain for you, it seems, smythie,” I prodded. “He is a clever one from reputation, and may be named Designate one day. You will do well to serve him until the House bears his name.” Ruthless as Primes may be, they are not all cunning. If reputation 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, even to a shire smythie. I liked control as well, but for different reasons.

I wanted to know how I was needed by an ogre Prime, but I feared all I would get was a rehearsed speech, and I needed to know 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 *oxtrix* egg. It glistened in the dawn like a giant black pearl. The smythie nearly exploded with surprise.

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

“I’m an ogrën you fool. I trade.”

“I took you to be ruined by the stuff of men, and here you eat better than old Mygh himself!”

Though he knew I traded far and wide, he could not believe that I possessed the prize of an ogreLord here in the deep forest. He breathed its aroma into all four greedy nostrils. But before I offered it to him, I asked, “What exactly am I needed for?”

Impatient to taste this rare delight—and I was not entirely happy to share such an expensive item—he blurted out, “Mygh needs to find an *ogress*. She is called by *Avocet*.”

Now it was my turn to be dumbfounded. “*Find* an ogress? What need would a Prime have to *find* an ogress? He should have his pick from among their Lodges.” Ogresses, the younger females of ogrekind, are as ambitious as any ogre and the idea that a Prime, especially one likely to be named Designate, would need help with finding one seemed as absurd as the smythie being in my camp, greedily eyeing an *oxtrix* egg. Yet here we were.

“She has run off from him, see? And so she offends him by her absence. He wants her back. But no one is to know,” here he paused thoughtfully as he was able, “because his position is not so sure as

the other Houses think.” He could focus on nothing but the ebony egg, and were his little wits about him he would never have told me this last bit.

He was foolish but I was more so. Now I was stung with blistering curiosity, a danger 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 it is my demon.

I handed him the treasure, and he received it with great trembling and delight. He took his time sniffing and savoring the egg’s pungent wonder, until he could no longer control his impulse to devour it. He groaned happily as the egg did its intoxicating work in his huge frame. “Gots nothing to wash it down with then?” He paused like a dog to see if he would receive another hand-out from his master. I tossed him a nearly full skin of my own brew, and watched as he guzzled half its contents.

“Careful, smythie. You do not know the table of an ogreLord yet,” I warned him. “That egg is meant to do the job even without drink. Now you will have a hard time enjoying my company.” And indeed the intoxication of both the egg and the ale were already evident on his ugly face. “Tell me more of this ogress, Avocet,” I commanded, knowing that the smythie’s conscious moments were drawing rapidly to an end with his overindulgence. But in those few moments, he told me much.