

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 I use the language of their people to set down my tale though my wives cannot read, nor many of their kin. But the scribes of their people can. 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 seem to match nicely. I decidedly prefer them to ogresses, who can never

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 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. (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 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, some explanation is in order. 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 thick left brow protrudes graciously. Opposite, my right cheekbone and jaw are heavy and rounded, giving me the appearance of one stung by bees, swollen into grotesque disproportion. 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 me difficult to anticipate and even harder to strike. In all respects, I am uneven.

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 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.

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, but not so strong that I could not count the band of tribesmen approaching my fire as night fell—a fire meant entirely for their distraction.

The tribes of men 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 stomach.

Fire fascinated some stone-chippers in those days, especially in the perpetual dampness of the ancient forests where it was hard to make and hard to keep. I could take my ease with or without fire 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 tool: only as strong as the hand that wields it.

The fire drew them, though they were wary. They were of the kind that believed they could take whatever they wished. They waited for some time before coming into the light, watching the fire wane. And when they believed there was no fire-starter to return, they gladly made camp and settled in for the deep darkness of the night. They became lax as arrogant men are apt to do when they

believe there is none greater than themselves.

I moved noiselessly from my place, staying downwind. Stepping almost into their midst, I slammed my spike-covered fist into the chest of the largest man dancing about the 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, tearing aside the animal hide draped over his body, 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. I looked 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.

“Delk...” one of them managed to stammer. I had something of a reputation even in my youth. I slowly removed my twisted helmet. 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. 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 took advantage of their indecision, speaking in the plain tones of their tribe.

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

“And so you have made war on me.” I shifted my weight and reached behind my back with my left hand. Slowly, without

immediate threat, I drew the heavy fighting spike from its fleecelined scabbard strapped to my back. It was 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 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 their fallen leader 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. They both made a mad rush toward me from opposite sides of the fire wielding their sad stone weapons. I remember the clumsiness of their attack in the flickering fire. 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 was barely within striking distance 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 to strike. Then it is a coiled snake.

The next attacker was to serve another purpose. I needed 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 ax. I gave 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 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 Og spread among his kind. 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, 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 forest tribe would interfere with my trade or attack the outposts of 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, 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 in my youth.

I always made my camps cautiously. Not that many were able to surprise me. My instincts were strong and my sense of smell stronger. From my ogress matron I inherited many such advantages: 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 ogreish side could never understand wasted opportunity for advancement or profit. Though I was not part of any ogre Clan, in my own way, position was just as important to me as to any clansogre.

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 here 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 accustomed to barter. Though they were mostly fishermen, they also planted any roots or vines that required little tilling or care. Pigs and forest fowl wandered continually about their settlements feeding on scraps.

They were quite 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.

What made them most eager to trade with me 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 the Liaux since I brought the kind of weapons and tools men could not make. I had long sensed that they 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 for comfort. 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 far enough back. I knew these tribes could be persistent and slow to learn despite the terror of this night. They were nomadic and I had to make these trips across the vast forest between the Great Isles and the Great River every spring season. 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 small wilderlands tribes—they could be dangerous if they ever gathered their strength and banded together. They could, given time, upset the balance I thrived on. I could not allow that. My trading partners were men too of course, but thinking men—men who valued what I traded and sought a place for themselves as I did. If the wildermen ever learned the power of gathering themselves, then no thinking creatures would be safe.