

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

"The Ogre's Pride"
a short, short story
by
Ari Marmell

continued from the Spectra Pulse newsletter...

He ran, ran as he hadn't run in years. Broad sticks splintered beneath his heavy boots, driven deep into gritty soil. Branches whipped his face, scrub scraped at his calves above his boots, raising welts that remained all but invisible against skin red enough to suggest an agonizing sunburn. Or at least it would have, had he been human.

On an ogre, it was typical enough, no more abnormal than the single eye that darted frantically left and right, seeking any possible escape, or the horn that snagged on overhanging boughs and left a rain of dismembered leaves falling in his wake. He crashed directly through the trees where he could, snapping branches and saplings without slowing, darting around the larger trunks where even his prodigious strength proved insufficient to clear his path. And still he heard the sounds of pursuit, drawing ever nearer. The trees were not tightly packed here, and those who followed him could fit between and flit around far more easily than he.

Damn it all, he hadn't even wanted this! He'd killed neither man nor woman, save when forced to defend himself, in almost three years. Not since he'd turned apostate, forsaking the worship of Chalsene Night-Bringer. Since he'd given up serving Lord Corvis Rebaine, the so-called Terror of the East.

Since he'd abandoned his tribe, in search of something better. Something he still hadn't found, and was starting to doubt even existed.

He'd been on the hunt that morning, seeking a deer or perhaps an unguarded sheep or cow on which to munch as he made his way across the plains of Imphallion. He traveled mostly at night—even before Rebaine's campaign of terror, an ogre near any of the nation's cities or highways could expect a welcome carried on the fletching of arrows—but he'd *thought* himself far enough from civilization that he could risk a daylight excursion.

No such luck. He never learned *why* they were there—perhaps some nobleman just wanted a change of scenery, or maybe this misfortune was the vengeance of Chalsene himself—but even as he'd darted across a length of back road that *should* have been empty, he'd stumbled directly into the path of a small procession. A heavy carriage-and-four, its wood painted black and emblazoned with

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

the ensign of a golden gauntlet, was trundling up the path, surrounded by no fewer than a dozen mounted knights.

Knights who were, perhaps understandably, unwilling to wait and find out just precisely why an ogre twice their own height had appeared in their liege's way.

Crossbows rose like spines on a porcupine, and the ogre hurled his spear with enough force to gouge stone. Alas, the weapon was balanced primarily for thrusting, not throwing, and so startled was he at the sudden confrontation that he failed to compensate. The weapon hurtled past the lead knight to embed itself in the wood of the carriage with a deafening crunch and a resounding, sonorous thrum. Horses reared in panic, the vehicle lurched, and knights stumbled. A dozen bolts flew, but the ogre was already running. Only three found their mark, and one of those failed even to penetrate the cyclopean giant's thick hide.

Ignoring two shafts protruding obscenely from his flesh, save for a slight limp that he couldn't help, he'd sprinted off into the scattered copses of trees. And at least half the knights, all gods damn them, had followed. Even when the terrain grew too rough and uneven, too loose and riddled with roots for their horses, they pursued. Their heavy armor didn't seem to slow them, or at least not enough.

Even now, after all he'd been through and all he'd deliberately left behind, he balked at fleeing from mere humans. He told himself it was the only way to walk in the footsteps of other gods, to abandon the blood and violence that were Chalsene's sacrament and ogre tradition both; he told himself, too, that with six-to-one odds, if not higher, the knights were a threat even to him.

He told himself, and he almost believed, until the trees grew thick up ahead. He could run no further, and he realized that a part of him was glad.

The ogre spun, putting his back to the thickening copse—even if it didn't keep the enemy from coming up behind, it would at least make sufficient noise to warn of their approach—and drew his sword. It was a hideous thing, all jagged metal and serrated teeth, designed less for battle than for butchery.

He didn't wait long. The first of the knights crashed from the sparser foliage in a tangle of leaves and steel. He hauled himself to a stop, staring through blank and empty visor at the ogre. The others appeared behind him, equally swiftly, until all six of his pursuers—no, the ogre realized, *eight*—now faced him. Unable to effectively aim their crossbows through the trees, they'd switched to sword or axe or mace. Their shields bore the same gold gauntlet standard as the carriage they'd guarded.

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

"Tell us your name, creature!" He wasn't sure which of the knights had spoken from behind those narrow visors; he *was* surprised that any of them thought him worth speaking to at all. "Tell us, so we may tell our lord who attacked him."

He could have argued. He could have pointed out that they shot at him as soon as he appeared on the road, and that it was they who pursued him when all he was trying to do was leave. But somehow, he was pretty sure that even if they gave him the time to explain, they wouldn't believe a word of it.

"Davro." His voice was deep enough to rustle the leaves, to squirm in the guts of all who heard it. Though he knew it would only enrage them further, he still had his pride; neither lying nor keeping silent ever so much as crossed his mind. "My name is Davro."

And indeed, even within their shells of steel, he saw them stiffen. Most had probably taken arms against the Terror of the East, and even those who didn't had certainly heard of the monster, clad in black-and-bone armor—and heard, as well, the names of his lieutenants.

"Then this isn't merely for our own lord," that same knight announced in a hiss, "but for all Imphallion!"

They came in a deafening clangor, a brass orchestra gone rabid, and Davro tensed to meet them. The first died instantly, as the first man in any group to attack an ogre *always* died: Caught unprepared, despite Davros' massive size, for the sheer strength of his blows. Shield and armor crumpled as easily as flesh and bone. Blood splattered and vanished, slurped greedily away by the dry and thirsty earth, and the heavy body became a missile, knocking another of the knights from his feet.

Then the rest were upon him, and the world became a blur of wood and steel. For a time, Davro's inhuman reach held them at bay, but with each prodigious swing he left a gap in his defenses, and each time a soldier managed to dart ever nearer. Men and women—the knights included both, to judge by their grunts and screams—fell, mangled and bleeding, beneath that hideous sword. But other blades licked in past his defenses, etching shallow wounds in ruddy skin. None were lethal, nor even especially incapacitating, but the burning sting and the fatigue of blood loss were beginning, albeit slowly, to demand his attention.

Three of the knights yet stood, and at least one of those who had fallen—his armor crinkled around his left arm and leg like paper—might still prove dangerous. The humans probably couldn't tell just how many wounds he'd suffered, since the blood didn't show as clearly against his skin as it would theirs, but Davro knew that this couldn't continue. Much longer, and they'd wear him down through sheer attrition.

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

So Davro did the unthinkable. With a sweep of one mighty arm, he hurled his sword between the two nearest knights. It roared past them, coming nowhere near to cutting either, and imbedded itself in the dirt beyond.

But it also drew their eyes, if only for an instant; the twisting of their helms was all the evidence the ogre required. And in that instant, Davro lunged, his arms spread wide.

Both knights toppled beneath his enormous bulk. He landed deliberately on one elbow, crushing a helm into the earth and snapping the neck beneath it. Unencumbered by armor of his own, Davro was back on his feet before the other soldier could rise, or the one still standing could reach them. He crouched, lifting the fallen form from the earth. He swung the knight about by the feet, slamming the helpless man into the nearest tree. Again armor folded, crumpling the body beneath it.

That left only one, or at least only one standing. Facing *those* odds, even wounded, Davro didn't need to retrieve his weapon. Steel screeched, bone snapped, and the ogre stood alone.

Only then did he kneel beside his sword, allowing his head to droop, panting and gasping for breath. He gazed down at himself and scowled at his injuries, causing his horn to quiver. A quick glance around revealed no medicinal herbs—at least none of those that the witch, Seilloah, had taught him about—so he settled for tearing bits of cloth from the dead knights' undergarments for makeshift bandages.

And then, for long moments, Davro leaned against one of the larger trees, and pondered.

He should just go. Continue on his way, keep looking for a place of his own, get away from those who would hurt him, or force him to hurt them. He had no good reason for seeking further trouble.

But Davro was still an ogre, with an ogre's pride. Some things, he could not—*would* not—let go. And if pride wasn't a *good* reason to seek trouble, then damn it, it was a *sufficient* one!

Davro straightened, narrowed his single eye at the tracks he and the knights had left in the grit, and began making his way back toward the road.

It was slow, arduous, painful work, trudging back through the various copses and thickets. Every step pulled at his wounds, setting some to bleeding again despite the bandages wrapped excruciatingly tight around them. Every bough seemed

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

determined to slap at his face or poke at his shoulders while he kept his eye fixed on the trail. Still and all, that wasn't the problem.

The carriage and the remaining guards were long gone, of course, by the time he finally reached the road. But he knew which way they'd been headed, so that wasn't the problem, either.

No, the problem was the village to which that road led. Not a large community by any stretch, consisting of only a few score inhabitants at most, its local economy was clearly based around the general store, the tavern, and the inn: all intended to take advantage of what few passersby found themselves, well, passing by.

Because that village sat on the only crossroads within miles, where the single thoroughfare became four. And while Davro knew the carriage hadn't turned around, he hadn't the first clue which of the three remaining directions the driver might have chosen.

For hours he crouched in the nearby hills, watching the people skitter about like insects, and seethed. He knew that time was getting away from him, but somehow, he didn't think he could just stop a random traveler on the road and ask for advice. Doubtless they'd just run screaming, and then the whole village would be out hunting him, bows and swords in...

Davro smiled, and knew what he must do. In the west, unconcerned with the ogre's impatience, the lackadaisical sun finally began to set.

It might not have been a part of the village's lifeblood, like the store or the tavern, but still it was one of the community's most well kept buildings. The wood was whitewashed and free of rot; no gaps marred the expanse of shingles on the peaked roof, by which rain or sleet or pigeons might gain ingress. Davro recognized none of the icons carved on the doors or shutters. He knew only that, as he'd expected (and hoped) of a seemingly peaceful populace, Chalsene's was not among them.

Only a select portion of the citizenry had filed into that church, ready to give thanks for the day just passed, or offer prayers for the day to come, or whatever it was humans asked of the gods when not in the midst of slaughtering in their names. Davro didn't much care. He knew only that, inside those hallowed walls, the people were contained—and, for the most part, unarmed.

Once he felt it had grown dark enough for him to dart across the expanse of roads and gardens without being spotted, he rose from hiding. Offering a quick whispered prayer, asking the forgiveness of any deity who might currently be

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

gazing upon this insignificant church, he broke into a long-legged sprint, head down, arms and legs pumping. A high-pitched screech suggested that he hadn't gone *entirely* undetected, but as it was followed by the sound of slamming shutters, he felt reasonably secure that nobody was yet preparing to raise an alarm.

Davro hit the door hard and ducked under the frame, scraping his horn shallowly across the wood. Without pause he slammed it shut behind, sticking a foot out to hold the portal against any attempt to open it from outside. The air was thick with incense and the echoes of a paeon that had halted in mid-verse. Enormously wide eyes stared at him from several dozen faces, the parishioners twisting awkwardly upon their kneeling cushions to see who, or what, had interrupted them. They wore what Davro assumed to be their best outfits—that is, those that weren't entirely worn and speckled with dirt—and if there was a priest among them, leading them in prayer, the ogre couldn't pick him out.

Better get this going before they start screaming and panicking on me.

"All right!" he called out, remembering only at the last instant to speak in Human. "I'm not here to hurt anyone. So long as nobody tries to leave, and you answer my questions, everybody gets to walk out of here with all their limbs."

"You can't do this!" One of the congregation, because there was *always* one, damn it, stood and turned to face him. Her face was pale, her lip quivering, but her jaw was set and she carried herself like someone who'd seen battle before.

He was suddenly quite glad he'd made a point of catching them unarmed.

"I can't?" he asked, his tone bland.

"No! This is the house of the gods, you monster! You—"

Davro reached out with both hands, clutched her about the shoulders and heaved her up into the rafters at the very peak of the sloped ceiling. There she clung, dangling above their heads; the room had again gone silent, save for her faint whimpering.

"The next one," Davro told them, "is coming down as hard as they go up."

"What..." The voice drifted from the assembly, cracked, cleared its throat, tried again. "What do you want?"

"An ensign. Gold gauntlet on black. His carriage just passed through earlier today. Who is he, and where did he go?" Then, after a moment of deathly silence, "You know, this place looks awfully flammable..."

"Baronet Urborin," someone else admitted. "He oversees some of the land in Emdimir. Don't know for sure which way he took when he left, but if he was heading home, it was probably the eastern road."

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" Davro turned, reaching for the latch.

"Wait! What about her?"

The ogre didn't even turn to look. "I'm sure one of you owns a ladder." And then he was through the door and sprinting once again, determined to be well and truly gone before the villagers could gather their wits, flee the church, and organize any sort of pursuit.

Through the night he made his way, all notion of rest banished from his thoughts. When the waning moon and stars shone bright enough, he ran, as surefooted as if he traveled through the height of day. When they did not, he crept, picking his path carefully but refusing to be halted. Davro had no idea how far it might be to Emdimir, and he knew that if the baronet reached the gates of the city, he'd lose his only chance.

He had to reach the carriage in time; he *had* to...

And praise be, either to the gods or to his own unyielding endurance and ground-eating lope, he did.

They, too, were traveling well into the night, possibly to avoid the "vicious ogre" they'd encountered earlier, perhaps simply determined to make it home swiftly, now that over half their guards had vanished. The carriage-and-four traveled at a slow but steady pace, rattling and clattering over ruts in the road. Two of the remaining knights rode alongside, one to either side of the vehicle, while the other pair had moved far ahead, scouting through the dark of night for any further danger.

Davro burst from the gently rolling knolls beside the road with a fearsome roar. The nearest of the horses reared in panic, and the ogre took the opportunity to shove the beast as he thundered past it, toppling it over backward atop its own rider. He lowered his shoulder and struck the carriage at a dead run; wood splintered, wheels left the road, and the entire contraption came down on its side, hurling the driver from his perch and the other knight from his saddle.

Again the wood creaked, threatening to give way, as Davro leapt atop the fallen carriage, staring down through the open windows. Within, a young couple—both bedecked in silks and satins, both with the arrogant mien of the nobility now washed away in a torrent of sniveling, nose-running terror—cringed back as far as the cramped confines would allow. Davro could smell the acrid tang of sweat and urine both, and chortled at the thought of these peacocks ruining outfits that probably cost more than the carriage itself.

The Ogre's Pride
by Ari Marmell

He had only moments before the last of the guards arrived, but still he reached out, slowly, deliberately, exulting in the terror as two pairs of eyes followed his every move...

Until, finally, his fist closed around the haft of the spear he'd hurled, all unwittingly, into the heavy wood of the carriage that morning. It came free with an ear-scraping squeak of steel on splintered wood.

"This is my favorite spear," he rumbled at them, holding it up so they might see. "My father gave me this spear.

"And I'll be damned and bugged if I'm going to let a bunch of *bloody humans* make off with it!"

Just like that, his task accomplished and his pride assuaged, Davro was gone, leaving Baronet Urborin's last two knights to calm their liege and pick up the pieces.

[back to the Spectra Pulse newsletter...](#)

ARI MARMELL would love to tell you all about the various esoteric jobs he held and the wacky adventures he had on the way to becoming an author, since that's what other authors seem to do in these blurbs. Unfortunately, he doesn't actually have any. In point of fact, Ari decided while at the University of Houston that he wanted to be a writer, graduated with a Creative Writing degree, and—after holding down a couple of very mundane jobs, such as retail positions and an advertising proofreader—broke into freelance writing. He has an extensive history of writing for role-playing games, but has always worked on improving and publishing his fiction at every opportunity. He has several shared-world novels and short stories in publication—including Agents of Artifice, a "Magic: the Gathering" novel—but The Conqueror's Shadow is his first wholly original published book.

Ari currently lives in an apartment that's almost as cluttered as his subconscious, which he shares (the apartment, not the subconscious) with his wife, George, and two cats who really need some form of volume control installed.