

Chapter 31 ~ Slaves of The Ogre

The third day after our victory, Owain called a council of all the tribes, as the situation regarding the Trolls needed to be resolved, and quickly. Llwydd had been controlling them in Olde Prussia, and realising they posed no threat, had taken it upon himself to release their shackles and allow them to live ordinary lives. Only a small guard force remained, the Trolls being monitored within the shielded complex that enclosed their ramshackle town, but that was proving to be a waste of time and resources.

The meeting was held in the Trolls' new homeland, and began with Owain making an impassioned presentation in favour of granting them Tribe-hood as *The New Tenth*. He recounted, “During both the battle for Berlin, and again here in Olde Prussia, the Trolls never acted against us. In Berlin Volkar and Stoltvar led us deep into the lair via secret underground passageways, and also saved many lives by their resourcefulness and swift actions. Without their assistance, we may well have lost that battle.

“I led the assault here, and can tell you the Trolls never once raised a word, never mind a weapon against us. They did wait to see our strength I will grant you, but once they knew we could defeat the Ogres, they rose up to kill their former masters, and made our victory easy in countless other ways.

“I call on this Council of the Tribes to grant the Trolls freedom to become a nation in their own right.”

Owain sat down as cheers, and some boos echoed around the large hall. Hogar immediately rose to challenge the proposal, “I deeply reject this proposal; have we not suffered enough already? The Sixth speak for all those that have suffered at the hands of the Tenth for æons; the Ogres and Trolls are the same. They merely seek their strength before they will turn on us.”

Hogar expressed a deeply fixated and vehement loathing of the Ogres, and saw no difference between them and the Trolls. A quarrel broke out, although people did speak in turn. The Fourth, represented by Ruaidhrí Ó Riáin, sided with Hogar and let us know some things best held within the secrets of darkest unknowing. However, I noted that these were either atrocities committed by the

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Ogres, or events where the Trolls as slaves, had been acting under strict orders, no doubt under pain of death if they refused.

The Third saw things from a completely different perspective, and Burnam proved effectively articulate in pursuing a different tack, completely countering the arguments of Hogar and Ruaidhrí. During the ensuing exchanges, we also learned a lot more about our disparate band of brothers.

The bizarre day turned surreal, as both Volkar and Stoltvar were called forth to speak for their people. Their presentation was amateurish, but it gave everyone an insight into the thinking of this large and imposing race, that had lived in slavery for millennia.

I had been keeping my own counsel, as had many others, but was surprised when during a pause n’Gnung at my side rose to address the entire hall. “Would it not be wise to ask these people what they want for their own future, before we decide it for them?” and that was all he said, whilst throwing his arm in a wide loop to highlight the Trolls present in the room.

Immediately the Twelfth and Eleventh rose and left to speak to the ordinary people present. I looked to my side, and had no idea why n’Gnung always found a path towards the solution of intractable problems, and wished I possessed his insight. But then again, to see with the eyes of other’s—would that become a blessing or a curse?

John came to me and offered his advice on how to move forwards, but wanted to know if I was in favour of giving the Trolls statehood or not. n’Gnung already knew my answer, as did Jinnie and Kay. I was formulating my response when Dawn interrupted, giving us many valid reasons to support the Trolls. John offered counter-arguments, not because he believed them, but because he needed to understand the opposite viewpoint. It reminded me of debating class at University; he was acting as agent provocateur.

n’Gnung caught my eye and imperceptibly flicked his head towards the door. I turned my own to follow, and saw Owain, Kay, Aroweena, and Gung Loi looning at me expectantly. John and Dawn were enjoying an exciting difference of opinion, although I knew they were on the same side.

And so it came to pass, n’Gnung threw a brotherly arm around my shoulder, and guided me unresisting towards the bountiful

mercy of the Three Sisters of Destiny. We swept Jinnie up in our wake. Owain welcomed us, “Let’s see the real people, and hear what they have to say. Come; time to fully explore this nightmare.”

Images of a lightning struck tower briefly crossed my mind, as I was lead willingly to meet this nation's fate, because upon the few of us present, hung their future, and even survival. Our group was deep in conversation, as unbidden, we roamed deeper, and yet deeper still into the darker recesses of their town. We had no idea where we were walking to, but there was an area of ramshackle homes set to the far side of the prison-like factories and workplaces we passed.

It was dire, and made more discomfiting by the deepening shadows of evening. I am sure we all felt uneasy, but to meet the ordinary Trolls, we were definitely headed in the right direction, straight into the heart of their clan. A group of burly men in ragged clothes watched us as we came towards them, loitering outside a workshop; they were observing us intently.

They thanked us for saving them from slavery, but I noticed one of the Troll’s hands clench and flex; they obviously wanted to know our intentions. Our swords and daggers presented a threat, yet they stood their ground and were obviously relieved when Owain spoke to them. “Friends, we mean you no harm. We want to learn about you, the real people. Help us understand your lives under thrall of the Ogre.”

The woeful tales were virtually the same for all; lives spent in complete servitude to the Ogres, who beat them and denied their families food upon the slightest error, or sometimes just because they felt like it. One Troll removed his shirt and turned around, letting us run our fingers over the deep welts caused by years of continual beating and lashings. His skin was rough and felt more like that of glacier scoured rock, than something part of a living being.

At my side, Jien Noi turned to speak to me, but instead tears of horror ran freely down her cheeks. I held her close, as this was grosser than she could ever have imagined. She was not alone, as it was clear we were all deeply shaken by the atrocity. In time, we learned he was not as badly scarred as some, and had not been permanently maimed, although others had lost the use of limbs, or the actual limbs themselves.

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The revelations of these men only served to spur us on in our quest to uncover the depths of these poor people's abject desolation. Despite the revulsion ingrained on her face, Jien Noi held up her head and stated firmly, "I have to see the all of it, I must understand the full gloom and gruesomeness of their lives. This is despicable."

All present agreed; we were deeply moved. The man who had shown us his back overheard us and offered to show us around, an offer we gratefully accepted. Our guide led us fortuitously to his meagre home set in the deepest depths of the ghetto's poorest quarter.

We felt eyes watching us as we strode deeper and deeper through a shantytown beset with abject misery. I remember one curious child standing to watch our approach, as if witnessing a miracle; his eyes were shining with wonder. A large green arm grabbed him and he was gone, his presence being replaced instantly by the slamming and bolting of a door.

Flickering fires appeared as the signs of evening meal were being assembled. These were left unattended, although we caught flickers of dread eyes watching from the blackness beyond. Twice I caught the unmistakable smell of rotting meat and wondered if these people liked to eat carrion, but we were informed; "It is a necessity, even though it makes us ill."

After twenty minutes we arrived before a collection of rubbish that had somehow been conjured into a small abode. The lean-to of our guide was a hovel, but spotlessly clean; his prematurely aged wife made us welcome. I had reservations, because nobody else knew where we were. But then, we were actually meeting the real Trolls for the first time, and not their more fortunate representatives, all of whom appeared to have presence right of that moment in the great hall; where we were resembled Chernobyl, repopulated after the meltdown.

We were greeted with a soupçon of spirit, it being the last they had, and they talked openly about their lives under the Ogres. A slave is too kind a word to put on their utter squalor. Their son and daughter, both less than 14 of our years, looked as if a mad scientist had played with their bodies in some hideous and ghastly way. Apparently, this was the fact. Their eyes were alive as they

moved on faltering, deformed limbs to serve us. They smiled at us because we had taken the time to honour them with our presence.

I'm not sure just how small and insignificant they made me feel. I rose and had them stand with me, as lesser beings would for taking a snapshot. My finger hovered over the return bracelet, and all heads of our company nodded to me in turn. I did not know if our medical facility could fix their bodies or not, but it was something I had access to that they needed, and so desperately.

I had imagined being away a long time, but surprisingly the immediate treatment was swift, and the robotic nurse even put a metallic extrusion on my shoulder and patted me. Alarmed I wondered what she knew that we did not, but her reticence returned before illumination was born, as are the ways of true enlightenment.

In spite of Owain's presence, the mood had turned sombre when I returned fifty minutes later, with two agile and bouncy teenagers. Shattered does not even begin to explain their parent's response. Their pure joy was all that was needed to make a grown man cry. I was guilty of that crime; we all were that night.

After the sobbing release came happiness, followed by astonishment: not just from their family, but for us also. Word soon spread about the miracle I had performed, although I only tried to do the best I could. That evening in the worst backwater of the town of the Troll, they came to us and welcomed us into their dingy midst with dignity, not as saviours of their kind, nor new rulers. They welcomed us as being people they respected and wanted to share their meagre lives and sustenance with.

The food was awful; the beer watered down, and watered again. Nevertheless, they shared what they had with us willingly, and even to going hungry themselves the next day. In the process, we became more horrified by their previous existence and determined to put it right. We learned the Trolls had been created by the Ogres as their slaves; most had never known freedom, except for those few who managed to escape; those such as Volkar and Stoltvar who were born free.

Rather than ravage the meagre remains of their cumulative larders, I sent n'Gnung to raid our stores, and moments later he came back with an irascible Da Phai Nai, who insisted on taking over provisioning, and later went missing. I rose to find her, and

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she was standing outside the door near our transported supplies, staring at nothing. I scuffed as I approached her, and she turned to me, a tear forming in her eye, “They...”

Her eyes swept around as she stifled a cry, her emotions almost engulfing her. I put my hand on her shoulder and patted her gently. She recovered and looked up at me before continuing, “They don’t have enough to eat.”

“Do what must be done.”

She flew into my arms, and as she quieted, I comforted her until she stilled. In time the brusque lady we all loved reasserted herself, “Try to take advantage of me would you, Guardian. Dream-on.”

I watched her march away with purpose, and knew she would leave supplies that would feed an army for one week. As I watched her go about her work, bringing in others to assist. Owain came and stopped beside me. We did not speak; we waited engrossed, as our eyes drank in the wretchedness surrounding us one more time. Da Phai Nai was busy cooking as we looked on.

“That there wee lassie,” Owain broke the silence for the first time, “I would take her for a wife.”

I put my arm on his shoulder and replied, “You have my blessing, although we would be lost without her, as you have just witnessed. To take her would bring her untold joy, but destroy something else that is unique.”

“Aye me young and gallant brother, therein lies the rub.”

With a heartfelt sigh, we turned as one, and with our steps aligned, eased ourselves back into the companionship of other’s. The evening became a matchless party, and: *Boy* did we learn about humanity, humility, and the gift of life that evening.

It is not *life* itself that is of paramount virtue, it is what you do with it of your own free will that counts.