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THE OGRE IN THE BREADKINS

Nestled in a pleasant valley surrounded by high mountains sat the small village of Polearm. It was named long ago by a fierce band of warriors who carried polearms as weapons; and they thought the name would be enough to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies. Whether another tribe invaded, or they went out to attack a neighbouring settlement; they would run headlong, yelling and shouting and waving their polearms. Usually this was enough and the enemy would turn tail and run away. Very occasionally, however, a battle would begin; and then the value of these deadly weapons was plain for all to see. In time, the Polearm warriors became so feared that no-one was brave enough to face them; but just in case anyone decided to try, a big sign with the name of their village was put up as a warning at the entrance to the settlement.

This entrance was a narrow canyon between the mountains and the only way in or out of Polearm, so it was easy to defend. Not that being invaded was a problem anymore; and because of this it might have been assumed that there was no longer any need to carry weapons at all; but the polearms had a use other than for fighting. You see, a polearm was as it sounded, and was a long pole with a big curved blade at the top. As well as excellent for fighting; because the blade was very sharp it was also ideal for cutting breadkins. These were a kind of large fruit that grew on trees, and were not only good for eating cooked or raw; but they could be dried, then ground into flour for making bread. The trouble was that breadkin trees only grew in the valley beyond the canyon.

Over the years, breadkin became the staple diet of the people in Polearm; meaning that they ate little else. Keeping up a good supply of the fruit simply meant the men walking through the canyon pulling wooden carts to carry the breadkins that they cut off with their polearms. This, of course, was a far cry from fighting battles; but the men still thought of themselves as fierce warriors; so when they left to go off fruit-picking, they sang old battle songs, yelled out war cries, and brandished their polearms in a threatening manner.

Adding to the excitement of such occasions, the women and children would gather at the start of the canyon waving and cheering. "What a wonderful sight," commented Jenta, "Aren't you so proud of our men?"

"I suppose," replied Aria unenthusiastically, "But it's not as if they are going into battle as the old-time soldiers used to." She went on to add that she'd followed them one day and watched

as they cut the breadkins. “They were actually attacking them as if they were the enemy. It was quite pathetic.”

“What does it matter?” asked Sofie. “They can pretend all they like as long as they bring enough breadkins to last the winter.”

This was a fact of life that was well known. During summer the men just went to the other valley every two or three days, depending how much food was needed at the time; but once the colder weather approached, the trek through the canyon became a daily task, gathering enough breadkins to store and last them for the entire winter. On one particular day the men of Polearm were making their way through the canyon when Captain Torrag commented: “It’s getting cold all of a sudden,” and he pulled the front of his coat closed to keep in the warmth. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it started to snow soon.”

“Surely it’s too early,” said Sergeant Collik, “The start of winter should be at least a month away.”

“Tell that to the weather,” Trooper Pesto groaned as one snowflake then another settled on his sleeve. “I reckon we ought to get a move on – I’m freezing.”

Seeing the sense in Pesto’s words, the men picked up the pace. The snow was only light for a while until it stopped altogether. By this time they were coming out of the canyon and heading into the valley towards the forest of breadkin trees. Almost there, Torrag held up a hand. “Halt,” he ordered. “Something’s not quite right.” It took him a few moments to realise what had caught his attention, then he was pointing at the trees. “Look – there are gaps in the forest. Some of the trees are missing.”

“You’re not wrong, Sir,” confirmed Corporal Boote. “Maybe they just fell over.”

After a brief hesitation, Captain Torrag had the men move forward again; but only slowly because he was unsure whether there was any danger awaiting them. At first it seemed not, although the matter of the missing trees was puzzling. “They haven’t fallen down at all,” said the Captain. “They’re just gone. It’s as if someone has simply pulled them out of the ground.”

“Not *someone*,” stated Sergeant Collik, pointing at the forest. “Some-*thing*, more like.”

Clearly there was a presence in the depths of the forest because the tops of the breadkin trees in the distance could be seen moving and swaying. Whatever it was, it was coming straight for them. Then it was pushing through the closer trees, and the men were able to define a dark shape lumbering through the breadkin forest. They all gasped and started to back away. “What is it?” Corporal Boote hissed in a trembling voice. “It’s gigantic!”

The brave men of Polearm were rooted to the spot momentarily as they gazed in awe at the monstrous thing coming out of the forest towards them. Then it spread its arms in the air and let out a tremendous roar that echoed round the valley. That was enough for them, and the band of no-longer-brave soldiers spun on their heels and raced back into the canyon. The women of Polearm weren’t expecting their men to return until much later, so when they burst from the canyon into the valley, everyone ran to find out why. “It was huge,” declared Torrag, “With a fearsome roar that was deafening; and it was waving a big club. We had no chance against it.”

“So, where are the wagons and our breadkins?” Jenta wanted to know.

“We didn’t get time to cut any fruit,” explained Collik, “And the carts are in the other valley where we left them.”

Here was truly a problem. From then on, the men of Polearm were too afraid to return to fetch the wagons; and there was no way they intended cutting any more breadkins; not with a giant creature lumbering around the forest. No-one had a solution; and as days turned into weeks, the supply of breadkins in the stores began to dwindle. It soon became obvious that something would have to be done; otherwise the people of Polearm would be forced to eat roots and leaves if they were to survive. “You have to go back to the forest now,” insisted Aria, “Before we all starve.”

“Well, if you’re so brave, why don’t you go?” Boote suggested jokingly with a smirk.

“Maybe we’ll do just that,” said his wife Sofie.

“What – women doing a man’s job?” snorted Torrag. “That’s unheard of. Women stay home and look after the children and do the cooking.”

“Pretty soon we’ll have nothing to cook,” said Jenta. “If you won’t do anything about it, we will.” Looking around the small group sitting at the camp fire, she began to rise. “Come on, ladies – there’s work to be done.” Then she was glaring at her husband Torrag. “We’ll need your polearms.”

“What? No way!” he growled. “You’re women, not soldiers. You aren’t allowed to carry weapons!”

The next morning bright and early, the women of the village set out into the canyon. Despite Captain Torrag’s insistence that they wouldn’t, the men reluctantly handed over their polearms. Snow lay on the ground; not all that deep yet, but more was likely to fall over the coming days; so it was important that the wagons be filled and brought back to the village before the canyon became impassable. The band of women was approaching the valley where the breadkin trees grew, and Aria mumbled quietly: “I only hope Aggrona is right about this monster.”

“She *is* very old,” said Jenta, “And she remembers things that happened before we were even born. The story she told about a race of gentle giants from the mountains sounded true to me; so this Ogre, as she called it, might not be dangerous at all. I believe that as long as we don’t appear threatening, it may leave us to pick the breadkins in peace.”

They advanced cautiously until they reached the spot where their men had encountered the Ogre; and they waited. Before long, the trees in the forest were moving as the huge creature pushed through and came lumbering towards them. Then, there it was; and it was just as the men had described. It raised its club in the air; which wasn’t exactly a club but rather an uprooted breadkin tree; then the beast let out a mighty roar. Taking a deep breath, Jenta said to the women: “Lay down your polearms. I’m going to try talking to it, and I don’t want it to be frightened.” Placing her own weapon on the ground, she started walking slowly towards the Ogre.

If it was possible for really ugly giants to smile, this one seemed to; especially as Jenta came closer. It was much taller than her and she had to look up as she began to speak: "Hello, there. We mean you no harm. My name's Jenta. Do you have a name?" The Ogre didn't seem to understand, so Jenta asked: "What's your name?"

The Ogre scratched his head; then squatted down and said in a soft voice: "If you mean what am I called, I am known as Basil. I did wish to speak with those men that came, but they all ran away. That made me very sad because I have had nobody to talk to for a long time."

Jenta turned and beckoned to the other women who came to stand beside her. "Say hello to Basil. It seems he is a very lonely Ogre." Over the next few minutes they all had quite a chat about the way things were with the people of Polearm; and especially why it had come to pass that Basil was so lonely. Apparently he had been out as usual with some of his tribe and had become separated. Before he knew it, a big avalanche of falling rocks had blocked the mountain pass behind him, cutting him off from the others. "Even as big and strong as I am," Basil explained, "I was unable to move all of the rocks, and now I am stuck here on my own."

"That's not quite true," said Aria. "We could be your friends, if you'd let us."

"And you could stay in our village for the winter," suggested Sofie.

Jenta looked the Ogre up and down. "You are pretty large, though," she said, "And you'd probably eat a lot of breadkins. Tell you what, Basil – how about we strike a deal: you help us to fill the wagons with breadkins; then come back with us to Polearm." Basil thought this a good idea and agreed. "There is just one extra thing I'd like you to do," said Jenta with a wicked grin.

With the help of the Ogre, the women soon filled the wagons and were on their way back to the village. The journey was made much easier with Basil pulling two carts; and as a bonus, because of his size, he was able to walk ahead, pushing through the deeper snow and clearing the track for the women following. Nearing the end of the canyon, Jenta had Basil stop and whispered: "Remember what you have to do now."

Basil certainly did. Trying hard not to laugh, he lumbered out of the canyon, raised his arms as he did and let out the loudest roar he could manage. You can guess how the villagers took this, in particular the men. Some scrambled to grab their polearms; but, of course, their women had taken them; so, defenseless as they were, all any of them could do was cringe in fear to await their fate at the hands of this awesome giant. In a few moments, however, their women emerged from behind the Ogre. They were laughing as was Basil at the joke that they had pulled on the men of Polearm; until it became obvious that the joke was a poor one and had struck terror into the hearts of everyone in the village. Then it was time to apologise and put matters right.

Throughout the coming winter, Basil cleared the way through the snow to the breadkins; accompanied by the men who, once again, proudly carried their polearms. When winter was over, they went with Basil to the site of the rock fall and eventually cleared the pass through the mountains. So, it truly was a happy-ever-after story for one and all – as every story should be.