It Ain’t Ogre Till It’s Ogre

By C. Randall Nicholson

Moonlight glinted off the glass shards as they fell around Jane’s head like rain, some of them glancing off the hands she had raised to protect herself. Behind her, the cold night air blasted in through the now ruined window, chilling her to the bone, but it was drowned out by the roar of the ogre chasing after her. She looked around for a place to hide in the abandoned cathedral where she’d just sought refuge, but nothing presented itself in the empty cavernous space, and then he had burst through the door in a shower of splinters.

“Hey, now,” she said, holding up her scratched hands in front of her, “can’t we talk this over?”

“No talk!” the ogre snapped back. “Girl die!” He was already hefting another rock like the one he’d thrown through the window. He was an ugly lump of muscle, the color of mold and nearly the size of her hut, or so it seemed at this proximity.

“But violence doesn’t solve anything,” she said, backing away with her hands still out. “I’m not your real problem here. Your problem is that you’ve got some emotional issues to work through, and those will remain even if you get rid of me, you know?”

“No talk!” he said again, and lumbered after her with footsteps that nearly knocked her off her own feet.

“Great,” she muttered, looking around again, but with no more success this time. Sometimes, she realized, animals just needed a little time to come to their senses. She remembered a wolf that had attacked her once but been in a better mood later after he’d had a nice meal. If she could just get out of here and come back – “Hey,” she said, “are you hungry? I could go get you something –”

“*Girl* food, right here!” he said.

So ogres ate people. Myth confirmed. What a disappointing night this was turning out to be. Most of the stereotypes seemed to be true. But she just knew that once she got closer to him, she would find something else making him tick beneath that gruff exterior.

He had backed her up against a wall now, and was raising his rock to throw it. He couldn’t miss at this range. He was close enough for her to smell his breath; it reminded her of a maggoty deer carcass she’d stumbled across once. But disappointed as she was about the stereotypes being true, her life now took priority over matters of principle, and she needed to exploit one of them to her advantage – namely, that ogres were stupid.

“Hey, wait,” she said, “that’s a horrible throwing stance. You need to plant your feet farther apart for balance, like this.” She demonstrated.

He squinted at her. “Like this?” he said, copying her.

“Yes, exactly,” she said, as she ducked and ran between his legs.

“No fair!” he bellowed after her, but she wasn’t stopping to talk. She ran out through the gaping hole where the door had been, into the woods beyond, and didn’t look back or slow down for three kilometers.

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When she was confident that she’d lost him, she allowed herself to slump down beneath a large oak tree and catch her breath. She was grateful she’d stayed in such good shape, and that she had explored these woods so thoroughly. She wasn’t too tired and she would be able to make her way back in due time.

She was a bit startled by the noise of something running after her in the underbrush, but just as she was about to leap back to her feet she recognized the sound, and then her beloved terrier burst out and leaped on her, licking her and wagging his tail.

“Charles!” she said, embracing him and scratching him behind the ears. “So good of you to come looking for me!”

She imagined, as she often did, that she could hear him broadcasting his thoughts at her. *Jane, I love you, but you’re an idiot,* he seemed to say. *You’ve gone too far this time.*

“Not at all,” she responded. “You said that when I tried to befriend the wolves and the bears and the dragons, too, and look how that turned out.”

*Yeah great, that was really lucky,* he said, *but this is different. Ogres hate you personally, just because you exist.*

“Oh, not you too,” she said. “Don’t you think I’ve heard it all before? I’m tired of this prejudice. How would you feel if people feared you and distrusted you, just because you were stupid and ugly, and you had to live by yourself in a cave? He just needs some love.”

*He just needs an axe to the face,* Charles muttered.

“No more of that,” she said, standing up. “All animals great and small have the same basic needs. I’m going to make him a nice hot meal. I bet he doesn’t even know how to cook, poor thing.”

*Oh dear*, said Charles.

“Great idea,” she said, and shooed him away.

Jane walked until she found a clearing, and then stood there with her eyes closed and arms outstretched. The crickets and peepers accompanied her as she began to hum softly, a tune she’d thought up herself and tweaked over the years until it was just right. Sure enough, it was only fifteen minutes or so before she heard a deer approaching. Opening her eyes, she saw the eyes of a young doe peering at her through some bushes.

Jane continued to hum, and gestured for it to come closer. The doe cautiously put one hoof forward, then another; and then, growing in confidence, it came right up to her and nuzzled her shoulder.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Jane, stroking the furry nose. “Good girl.” She hummed again, radiating the feeling of universal love that had made her a friend of animals everywhere, as she moved her hand farther back. Then she placed her other hand on the creature and, with a sharp twist, broke its neck.

As it slumped lifeless to the ground, Jane looked away and tried not to cry. She didn’t like hunting, wasn’t comfortable with it at all, but she understood the cycle of life and that everyone had to eat and that killing was necessary sometimes. And this was one of those times.

As if on cue, Charlie trotted up to her again from wherever he’d been hiding to keep the deer from smelling him. *You’re really going through with this, then,* he said.

“Yep,” said Jane. “Here, while I’m getting this ready, run back home and get a basket of carrots and potatoes from the garden. He needs a balanced meal.”

*I want nothing to do with this crazy scheme.*

“I’ll let you have some of the entrails.”

He sighed. *You drive a hard bargain,* he said. *I’ll be right back.*

As soon as he’d gone, she started gathering kindling and larger sticks and arranging them to build a fire. She was quite pleased with her skill set, all things considered.

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The ogre didn’t answer when Jane yelled down into his cave, so she retraced her steps back to the abandoned cathedral where he’d chased her. There she found him slumped over, fast asleep, in the ruined doorway, snoring loudly enough that she heard him long before he came into view. She hesitated. He wouldn’t be happy if she woke him up, but she couldn’t just leave his dinner there. He wouldn’t know it was from her, and she wouldn’t build a connection.

Her dilemma was resolved and she tiptoed closer and he stirred awake, sniffing the air. “Urgh?” he mumbled. “Food?”

“Hello again,” she said, waving cheerily with one hand while the other held the basket of roasted venison and vegetables. “Listen, I think we got off on the wrong foot earlier, and I wanted to make it up to you. I’ve brought you something delicious.”

He squinted suspiciously at her as she stopped near him and held out the basket. He lurched to his feet, shaking the ground, and let out a belch that also shook the ground. He scratched his stomach, then snatched the basket away with almost enough force to tear her arm off. Looking inside, he sniffed at it some more and started to salivate. “Food,” he said more emphatically.

“I hope you like it,” she said. “I fancy myself a good cook, but more importantly, it’s made with love. See, I know you’re just lonely and misunderstood, and that if people just took the time to get to know –”

He brought his fist down on top of her skull and cracked it like an egg.