

The hunting camp was comprised of three dwellings and two outbuildings in a clearing hewn from the forest. There was a loafing shed to stable animals, and a cool, stone storehouse. The site had been selected for its view of the lake, the forest, the hills, and the rugged mountains above it all. Baron Rethamir came out to it every fall for official hunts. Last fall, he had been accompanied by a dozen nobles and twice as many attendants. His Huntmaster brought Cora along and she led the hunting party to a very large elk.

The shelters were not thrown together by mountain men with what was at hand, but, in the baron's father's time, a whole guild of craftsmen spent a summer making it. The dwellings were fit for nobility, but designed to feel rustic. Each was a multi-storey timber-frame with deep eaves and stone and shake siding. It had taken hundreds of mule-loads to haul the materials. Twenty mages enchanted the structures, making them immune to natural fire and anything an ogre might hit it with. The magic continued protecting until today. The orcs and ogre had tried to smash their way in, but had to settle for the open-fronted animal shelter.

Cora and Menton watched until they were certain they saw all the enemies. There were five orcs with the ogre.

The orcs of this range were much taller than a tall man and the ogre made them look puny. When it stood, the orcs were barely above its elbow. Human-like monsters normally wore layers of boiled leather armour, but these had old-style chain mail that was crudely fit. Shields, pikes, swords, and two muskets leaned against the largest cabin and a pile of dismembered human bodies was beside the fire, as were the six monsters. Bones were scattered everywhere.

Cora backed away into the trees. They needed another plan. This was too dangerous. Cora couldn't imagine her group facing five orcs and an ogre. The Blood Pass Guard had to take this camp. Menton stood between his pack horse and her mule. He had put his large, crest-shaped shield on. She motioned him to turn back.

Menton had a devilish gleam in his eye. He stood tall, drew his sword, and walked toward the monsters.

Cora was stunned. Orthane liked to hurt himself, but Menton wanted to die. She reached out to grab his flowing cape, but he easily tugged free.

Menton strode ahead swinging his sword and shield like he was on an invigorating stroll. An orc spotted him. It shouted and all the monsters moved. The orcs ran to the weapons against the wall, strutting and howling at the approaching prize. The ogre grimaced as it stood. It grabbed a burning log the length of a man from the fire and stamped its foot with a furious scowl. Cora, still hiding in the trees, felt the ground shake.

Menton raised his arms, spreading his cape as two orcs rushed him. He ducked under one swiping sword and the other clanged off his shield. The cape furlled around, revealing a spray of blood from low in the first orc's belly and Menton deflected the second attack from the other monster.

The wounded orc staggered and fell. It put one hand on its wound, howling with rage

and squirming on the ground.

Menton moved like a dancer. Down, right, up, twirl. His moves put him back in front of the orc that had tried to cut him twice, with Menton's sword cocked high and his enemy's making a furrow in the earth. Menton slapped quickly with abrupt sword whips above its shield. Two deep, red gashes opened up on the orc's cheek before a gush of blood shot out of its neck.

Cora had her bow out before approaching the camp and now she nocked an arrow. The three other orcs were two steps away from striking. The ogre was two steps behind them.

Menton shuffled gracefully left. The orc with the neck wound struggled to control its legs, but tripped and fell. The one already on the ground tried to push itself up and collapsed. The cape swirled around Menton again. His shield clanged, moved clanged again as the second wave of orcs attacked. He reversed his turn and leaned under the fifth orc's horizontally swiping spear.

The last attack rotated the orc's chest. Menton reversed his own twist and punched the tip of his sword through the rough steel links of armour with a screech. The orc scrambled away and the sword coming back out tented a point in the mail. Blood ran over the steel links. The orc's retreat became a collapse.

The last two orcs spread out. Cora let fly at the one on the right. The arrow hit the chest but didn't penetrate the mail. It stuck, hanging down like a tassel.

Menton hopped back, jerking to free his thin sword from the mail armour. The fallen orc's chest bucked slightly, but the sword tugged free. Menton moved to the side with an exaggerated lean that barely avoided a sword, then swung to parry one from the other orc. Another shift and three more parries followed.

Cora shot at the ogre, hitting it in the abdomen. It wore a parka of mismatched hides, but the arrow hurt it enough to make the monster put a hand to its new puncture. It looked like a needle in the huge beast's belly. The ogre scanned the trees. Cora stepped back and ran to the right.

The pace of the battle changed. More swords clanged and fewer steps repositioned than before. At the beginning, Menton landed more blows on flesh than parries, now he exclusively blocked. His sword sprang from one orc's strike to the other's and back again, whipping and whistling with its speed. It took twenty deflections in the span of three heartbeats for Cora to understand why the battle shifted. Menton maneuvered to keep the two orcs between the ogre and himself.

The ogre did not wait for an opening. It took a lunging step, swinging for the orc on Menton's left. Sparks flew and smoke trailed off the burning log. The orc was hit completely unaware. The hard plunk sound of the impact was accompanied by the snapping of the orc's pelvis and ribs. The folding creature crashed limply onto the other one, still pushed by the heaving log. The last orc was smashed by an orc and a club.

Cora could not see Menton's eyes to know if he saw this attack coming. She didn't even have time to shout a warning. If he didn't see it, he reacted perfectly. The moment the four hundred pound, burning weapon swept by, he stepped back, then lunged way

forward, pushing his thin blade to half its depth in the ogre's chest. He kept his pose and stabbed three more times as the oxen-sized torso turned with the swing.

The ogre moved its legs and twisted to reverse its strike. Menton lowered his sword and readied another thrust, this one cocked sideways. His weapon pierced upward through the hip bone. Menton shifted and forced it deeper in until the hilt stopped it. He let go of his sword and took two steps away.

The weight of the log and tension of the ogre's wound-up torso were forces that could not be stopped. Straightening out the spine pulled the buried blade through guts and muscle. When the log passed directly in front, the point of the sword poked out under the ribs of its back, opposite the pierced hip. By the time the ogre struck Menton's shield, it had a spout of entrails and blood draining out, the unmoving blade dragging an inexorable cut.

Menton was moving away, he had his shield in a position to deflect the massive flaming club upward, and the ogre stopped putting strength into the swing early in the effort, but the blow still struck him with the clout of a siege gun. He was knocked through the air and rolled akimbo to lie face down, unmoving, five yards away. His shield arm was wrenched around one complete time and curled over his back with the shield against his body and his shattered arm up to the sky.

The ogre, still standing, tried to reach across to pull the sword, and howled at the twisting effort. The blood of five men streamed out behind it like a mountain creek's short waterfall. It dropped the log and the monster used its other hand to draw Menton's sword out of its side. It covered the gushing wound, swooning on the spot for a moment before looking at Menton, unmoving on the ground.

The ogre bellowed as it lifted one foot. The earth shuddered with its heavy step. Cora didn't think Menton was dead, nor would the titanic ogre live much longer, but even if it just fell on him, it would be enough to kill. She nocked another arrow.

The ogre lifted its other foot. That leg was coated in blood.

Cora shot an arrow in its chest.

The next step came down, heavier. Two lumbering strides covered two thirds the distance. The ogre reacted slowly to the little needle that struck him. It turned its head to look at Cora as it grimaced for another step. Menton's sword looked like a toy pinched between two fingers and a thumb.

Cora loosed another. It sank to the fletching in the middle of the throat. The ogre managed to get its foot clear of the ground, but all strength and life left the hulking monster as it was swung it to stomp on Menton. The ogre collapsed, narrowly missing the man that killed it.