

THE OUTCAST

The shaman bent over the litter on the floor, the light from the fire at the center of the yurt danced over her uncertain expression. With practiced hands, she began her duty, unrolling a long piece of hide to reveal her ritual tools, powders, potions and other implements. The scalpels which she'd carved herself out of stark white bone and varnished with oil, gleamed as they lay waiting to be used. A tiny box revealed a collection of bottles bearing preserved herbs, each marked with a handwritten label. With little deliberation, she gathered a few herbs into a mortar and pestle and began grinding.

She stopped at hearing a whimper in a remote corner of the yurt. So focused had she been on her task, that she'd forgotten the eight tiny bodies huddled in the shadows.

Her patient was their mother, and she knew that without the shivering form on the litter, they would be facing the hard life of other orphaned Goliath before them. It would be even more difficult for the one which had distracted the shaman with his whimpering. He was only half-Goliath. His father had been a human traveler, an island who'd drifted from his people and found solace as first an outsider, then a friend to the clan, and eventually a lover to one of its widows.

The chief had allowed the little one to live with the clan, but he had never found belonging. Like his father, he was more like a friend than kin to the other Goliath. Only his siblings treated him like family. The shaman could barely make out the shape of their forms crowded together beside one of the other beds ringing the yurt.

A sound from the entrance arrested their attention. A form filled the doorway. Gazak, the head shaman of the Thuliaga Clan had always been tall and imposing, even by Goliath standards. The hides he wore fell over his gray shoulders and grazed the floor. The snow outside fluttered in behind him as he let the cloth door fall closed. He approached cautiously and knelt beside the patient. "How does she, Zonia?"

The shaman cast a glance over her shoulder at the children. "I have not applied the poultice yet." Zonia's eyes met Gazak's. "I have yet to appeal to Kavaki."

Gazak drew a finger over the sick Goliath woman's forehead. A shadow fell over his face.

Zonia took pains to conceal the shake of her head so she wouldn't alert the children. "She may make it through the night," she whispered.

He withdrew his hand and used it to pull the hides off his shoulders. "I wish this plague did not make them shiver so." With that, he tenderly lay the furs over the woman.

His brothers and sisters had not let on as to whether they had noticed, but Ugvec, the product of both man and Goliath, surrounded and yet so isolated, *had* noticed. It was not as though Goliaths never felt or showed affection, but it was rarely displayed, reserved for the privatest of moments. The shaman's gaze was soft, the rigid lines in his forehead and at the corners of his eyes had smoothed, his eyes had closed in solemn reverence.

Tenderness from those made of stone. It was what Ugvec had spent his few years pining for, and had never received.

And it was this tenderness that told him that his mother, Rolesh, would be dead by morning.

Ugvec waited with baited breath as his brother Argun made the mark above his head.

"Six inches, little one."

Ugvec jumped for joy, clapping his hands hard. "Yes!"

Argun rolled his eyes. "It's just six inches of height."

"But, it'll make all the difference," Ugvec remarked. "No wonder my jump distance is improving!"

"Now perhaps you won't get knocked over so much," Argun said with a grin. "Are you going to compete today?"

"Hells yes, I will!" Ugvec jumped again and stomped hard.

"You are a sweet little thing," Argun ducked out of the yurt and into the pale spring light.

Ugvec stripped off his shirt and leather pantaloons. He stood in just his breeches, feeling the power in his chest and arms swell. He had trained through the winter to improve his body and his physical prowess so he wouldn't get destroyed on the Goatball field.

The moments were fleeting before he stood beside his brothers, facing their opponents in the first game of the season.

"Look at the half-blood!" yelled the tallest Goliath on the opposing team. Zaako made no attempt to hide his air of superiority. "He looks as though we could *blow* him over with the wind in our chests!"

"The mere *smell* of your breath would knock me over first," Ugvec said with a grin.

Every Goliath burst into laughter, everyone except Zaako. In an instant, he lunged forward, but one of his teammates stopped him.

"Save it for the game," Kathia said, her eyes glittering with mirth. She gave him a hearty slap on his bare back.

Zaako snorted and cracked his neck with a toss of his head. "Let's start already!" he shouted.

Ugvec's brother Varath stepped forward. "Keep it clean. One player per platform, one move per round."

"We know the rules!" barked Aurnak from the opposition's side.

"Fine. Then take your places."

Kathia, Aurnak, Zaako and Kazad took their marks.

The twins Thakin and Jakin took their places beside Ugvec and Argun.

When everyone had a platform, a young Goliath approached no-man's zone and tossed a coin.

Kathia called heads before Argun could.

Heads won, so Kathia's team would start with the ball.

She received it, but one glance at Zaako told her the game would be more *interesting* if he threw first, so she passed it to him.

"Yes!" he growled. He pounded the ball into his palm aggressively.

A referee on the sidelines began the countdown, "I charge you to play fair for the glory of Kavaki. Begin in three ... two ... one! ... Engage!"

As soon as the words left the referee's lips, Zaako hurled the ball straight at Ugvec's head. It struck him broadside on the forehead.

Ugvec reeled and swerved but managed to keep his balance. He took a few deep breaths, though his temples were starting to throb. Once steadied, he locked into horse stance again and smiled wryly at Zaako.

A roar of frustration rumbled from Zaako's chest.

One platform behind him, Thakin intercepted the ball and aimed for Aurnak. The strike connected, and Aurnak lost his footing, but parlayed his weight into jumping onto another platform. He immediately attempted a revenge strike, but hit Jakin instead.

Jakin lost his footing and fell to the ground.

"Out! End of round!" the referee exclaimed.

Onlookers expressed their disapproval first and then their encouragement of the fallen player. Jakin limped to the sidelines while his brother looked on unhappily.

"Round two!" the referee called. "Engage!"

In round two, Zaako took aim again at Ugvec and struck him a second time, this time in the shoulder. Again Ugvec was able to stay steady. Zaako's face was red with fury.

For the next few minutes, the teams traded strikes, but few were successful.

Then, thanks to Argun's aim, Kazad took a hit square to the chest and fell.

“Out! End of round!” the referee exclaimed.

Round three brought Zaako forward. With just two players, the opposition couldn't afford to move much, lest they lose advantage.

Not far into round three, Zaako faked a throw at Ugvec, but actually struck Thakin. It was so convincing that Thakin couldn't react fast enough, and he plummeted to the ground.

“Out! End of round!”

Now the teams were even.

The game wouldn't end until all the members of one of the teams were knocked off their platforms.

Ugvec had never lasted this long in a game. In the past, a strike would have rendered him unconscious in the first or *maybe* second round (if he could avoid being hit in round one).

Argun nodded in Ugvec's direction. He knew it, too, that Ugvec was showing true grit.

More spectators had congregated to see if the half-blood would win, and now it seemed the entire clan was looking on.

Trying his best not to seem rattled by this, Ugvec screwed his gaze at Zaako. A warm trickle of liquid interfered with his right eye's vision. He swept his hand over it and saw blood in his fingertips. He hadn't even noticed that his forehead had been cut.

*No matter he thought all the better to show I won't be thrown. I am going to **win** this game.*

“Round four! Engage!” the referee shouted once more.

This time when Zaako chunked the ball at him, Ugvec stunned the crowd *by catching it*.

He aimed at Kathia and his strike landed on her shin. Her leg buckled and she landed hard in the dirt.

The crowd gasped.

“Out! End of round!”

Zaako snarled and pitched his head like a raging beast. “You'll not take me down so easily, half-blood! Come and get me!”

“I shall! And I'll help them carry you out, Zaako!” sang Ugvec happily, though his head was splitting.

Argun burst into raucous laughter.

“You'll pay for that, you scrawny prick!” Zaako made a move forward, closer to Ugvec than he'd previously been. If he struck Ugvec at that proximity, there was a good chance Ugvec would fall, even if his stance was good.

Seeing this, Argun took note of the distance he would have to jump to protect his brother.

It was fortunate he *had*, because as soon as the engagement was called, Zaako threw as hard as he could. Argun jumped and intercepted, the consequence being that he hit the ground. A nasty *crack* emanated from his chest.

“Hells and damnation!” Argun cried as the ball bounced beside him, then came to rest.

“Out! End of round!” the referee called, before bounding onto the field to help Argun stand.

“What possessed you to do that!” Ugvec yelled.

“I thought I could catch it!” Argun lied, grappling his broken ribcage with his free arm. He chuckled. “Don't worry about me, just win the game!”

Zaako's maniacal cackle sounded unlike his usual boisterous laugh. “Just as well! The stupid idiot *deserved* it!” he jeered loudly.

The muscles in Ugvec's neck tightened as he clenched his jaw. The referee handed the ball to Ugvec and moved to the sidelines.

Ugvec felt the resistance of the goat hide push back against his grip. He narrowed his eyes at the annoying jerk whose asinine display had injured his brother.

“Round five! Engage!”

Zaako used his move action to jump back one platform.

Ugvec kept his place, pitched backward, raising his leg to counterbalance his upper body's weight, then threw the ball as hard as he could, straight at Zaako's center of mass.

Having misjudged the half-blood's throwing ability, he could scarcely prepare for the strike. He took it straight to the chest, the ball's force sending him sailing off the platform and onto the edge of the one behind him.

The crowd gasped again.

“Winner! Team Windrunner!”

Everyone waited, but Zaako didn't move.

“He must be knocked out!” Kathia exclaimed. “Someone help!” She and her team members gained pace and knelt by their fallen comrade.

Ugvec came up behind them.

“Well, Zaako! I've come to help them carry you off as I promised!” he said with a triumphant laugh. Unfortunately, Ugvec couldn't see Zaako's stupid face because his teammates were checking him for breaks.

Suddenly, Kathia's eyes shot up to Ugvec's. “You ... killed him.”

Ugvec's breath caught in his chest. “What?”

The referee joined them, knelt beside Zaako, whose vacant expression Ugvec could now see. His dark eyes stared blankly at the sky. A pool of blood appeared under Zaako's blue-gray head and grew larger by the minute.

Kathia stood and shoved Ugvec's shoulder hard, almost knocking him over. “You half-blooded, spineless waste of life! I hope they cage you and hang your body where the carrion can feast on your eyes! Murderer!”

Though she wasn't weeping, Ugvec could tell she was deeply disturbed.

He could feel his mind divide, the humanity in him yearning to apologize and beg for forgiveness while the Goliath in him was enjoying the victory. His body stiffened as he stood tall. “I won fair and square, Kathia. I am sorry if this result displeases you.”

It was perhaps the least human moment of his life, but it had felt right to dismiss her feelings over the fairness of the game.

“Come away,” Kazad said softly, taking her by the arm. “This futile display won't bring Zaako back.”

She shouldered her way out of Kazad's gentle hold and stormed away.

The referee stood up. “The game was won fairly. All glory be to Kavaki.”

A Goliath woman thundered out of the crowd and dropped to her knees beside the fallen player. “Kavaki, no! Not my Zaako! Not my son!” she screamed.

Argun's hand on Ugvec's shoulder startled him. “Come. Let's go home.”

Ugvec shook his head. “No. I promised I would help them carry his body.”

“You jack ass! He's dead! You said that as a joke!”

Thakin and Jakin joined Argun in urging him to leave.

“Stop it!” Ugvec barked.

Without a word, his teammates turned and walked away.

The crowds stepped back as one or two of the larger Goliaths in the clan came forward. They bent to pick up Zaako's body. Ugvec supported the fallen Goliath's head, his fingers entrenched in blood. No one said a word as they carried him to the shaman's tent, followed closely behind by Zaako's mother.

For some time, the healer's tent was crowded. Family had come to mourn, and most of them had gone away. Zaako's mother, Thurna, had never left her son's body for a moment. Ugvec had been standing in a corner saying nothing for some time before Chief Zageth came into the tent.

Thurna stood and nodded her head in deference.

The Chief took a look at the body, leaned his spear against the tent wall and knelt by the litter. He placed a hand of blessing over the dead Goliath's body. “May you be received with honor by Kavaki, son of Clan Thuliaga,” he whispered.

He stood up and greeted Thurna. “I am sorry for your loss. He will be prepared for burial with all

proper respect. I hear he died with honor.”

Thurna shot a heated glance at Ugvec. “The half-blood murdered him.”

“Is that so,” Chief Zageth said, passing his eyes over Ugvec. “Tell me, where is—”

Before the chief could finish his sentence, the tent flap parted and Gazak entered. He stopped in his tracks. His breath hitched.

Thurna shed a single tear and bent over her son's body.

“My boy,” Gazak mumbled, closing the distance between himself and the litter.

“I am sorry for your loss, brother.” The chief placed a hand on his tribesman's shoulder. “His loss will be felt throughout the tribe. He was a good hunter and a fine fighter.”

Gazak nodded, his expression empty, his eyes fixed on the body at his feet. “I thank you for your kind words, my Chief.”

“I will leave now so you can mourn.” The Chief retrieved his spear and turned to Ugvec. “Come with me.”

“How did it happen?” Gazak asked, kneeling beside his wife.

“It was the half-blood,” she hissed angrily.

Gazak stood quickly and caught up with Ugvec, who hadn't yet met the Chief by the door.

“Is this true! Was it you!?” he growled through gritted teeth. He took Ugvec by the neck with one massive hand.

“Release him!” The Chief ordered.

“You killed my only son, you scum!” Gazak shook Ugvec so hard the vertebrae in his neck popped painfully.

The Chief put the tip of his spear to the side of Gazak's neck, “Do not ignore me, shaman!”

Gazak released Ugvec and stepped back.

“This is not the time nor the place!” Zageth withdrew his weapon. “He has committed *no* crime, and I *order you* to leave him alone.”

Gazak put his back to them. “I will obey.”

The Chief took Ugvec by the arm and towed him from the tent, where a few onlookers still stood whispering rumors.

“We have not had any deaths during a game of Goatball since the time of my father's father,” the Chief commented as he walked. His yurt was not far away, and Ugvec followed him there while saying nothing. Aside from his windpipe feeling as though it had been crushed, he was weary from being reminded of how horrible the day had been. Under normal circumstances, he'd be feasting and celebrating his win by now.

They entered the Chief's tent, which was the largest among the Clan dwellings. The Chief sat on a divan next to the luxury of his perpetual fire.

“Come and sit, Littlefoot.”

As was tradition, the Chief gave everyone a nickname, and Ugvec *hated* his. It reminded him of his heredity; and he had grown to hate his mother's choice to lie with a human.

Ugvec sat opposite the Chief on the other side of the fire.

“I can tell by your face that you are disappointed in your win.”

“Disappointed in Zaako's death,” Ugvec said quietly.

“It was your first win if I am correct,” the Chief added.

Ugvec nodded, staring into the fire.

“Today is hard, but tomorrow will be easier. I will issue a statement that says you should not be harmed. It was a tragic accident.”

Ugvec nodded again, though he wasn't sure why. He wouldn't have called the entire thing an accident. He had been *trying* to displace his opponent. That was the point of the game. The death ... Ugvec really had to search his conscience to know whether he had *wished* for Zaako to die. It was true that he had the

charm of an ice chigger boring into one's skin, but did that mean he'd deserved *death*?

"You are silent." The chief chuckled. "That is a very human quality. Your father was like that as well."

Ugvec met his gaze. "I didn't know you knew my father."

"Only briefly, and insofar as he was present during your mother's pregnancy."

His heart leaping in his chest, he leaned forward, gripping his knees. "What was his name?"

"I only knew him by the name your mother called him." Zageth scratched his temple. That "human" silence overtook Ugvec again as he stared knowingly at the hulking gray chief.

"She called him ... what was it ... *Red Streak*." The chief laughed. "Yes. That was it." Zageth grinned. "He had a bright red streak in his black hair. It was quite unusual."

"Did he ever say why he was leaving—or where he was going?"

The chief shook his head. "I am sorry, Littlefoot. He kept his secrets well."

Ugvec sank, burying his forehead in his palm. "I feel as though I never get answers; just more questions."

"There will come a time when the answers will come, but you must go out to meet them," the chief replied. "No Goliath ever found himself by staying with the tribe. Most go on a pilgrimage to grow their skill before returning to the tribe." He nodded. "You've drawn blood," he remarked. "Regardless of the conditions of the kill, killing makes you a man, and it earns you the protection of Kavaki. Now that you are worthy of the blessing, you have my permission to leave the clan to seek your answers if you wish."

"Leave ... " Ugvec said quietly.

"It is not an easy decision to make." Zageth leaned back on his pallet of skins and drank from a stone goblet nearby. "Many who leave never return, but that is the danger Goliaths crave." He took another long drink from his cup. "I can only say this. Open your mind to the guidance of Kavaki. He will set your path and bring you to your destiny."

He leaned forward and offered Ugvec his cup. "This will help."

Ugvec wearily took the cup and looked into it. A strange dark-brown liquid sloshed in the bottom. When he took a sip, it was uncomfortably bitter, and he must have made a face to that effect, because Zageth's tent shook with his laughter.

"Ah, Littlefoot. I will miss you."



That night, Ugvec dreamt that he was hunting and foraging on a mountain path. Suddenly, the rocky outcropping opened into a small pass to the peaks. A figure darted here and there between the rock formations, its weight disrupting the peace of the hill-scrub growing in the high-altitude.

Ugvec squinted against the golden light of sunset, trying to make out the figure, and pushing forward through the frustration of his failure. He trudged up the trail, trying his best to track the creature, until he reached the top of the mountain peak.

Clouds obscured his view of the ground and his own feet. He watched as it climbed up the rocks until it had formed a wall. Then it parted and Ugvec gasped at what he saw.

A majestic ram, larger than any he'd seen before, stood beating the ground with its hooves. Gleaming gold horns curled out of its brow and around its ears. Its eyes, dark as bottomless pits, surveyed him. Black and gray fur rippling down its back and sides. Ugvec almost fell in shock as the beast reared up suddenly and let out a thunderous bray which echoed all around them.

The mists reached up to embrace the creature, swirling around it in a delicate dance. And when the gossamer curtain slid away, it revealed a great and terrible Goliath with a massive battleaxe strapped to his bare back. The corners of his mouth curled up, revealing gleaming white teeth.

The sight was enough to chill him to his bones, and chill his heart with excitement.

The God Kavaki himself had come to Ugvec in a vision. He dropped to his knee in deference, utterly shaken.

“Up, boy,” The Goliath said, his words rough like gravel on Ugvec's ears. The god turned away, and his heavy footsteps continued further to stop at the crest of the peak.

Nearly tripping over himself in awe, Ugvec rose and followed.

The Goliath pointed through the thick mist, which fell away at his touch.

Ugvec strained to see, and then it felt as though his eyes were alive with molten flame.

It was as though he could see everything in every realm, all coming to him in a frenzied rush of bright shapes and colors.

Kavaki was sharing his sight with Ugvec!

His senses rushed over jutting rocks, down the mountain and to the valley, then sped over leagues of cold planes. He struggled as his mind threatened to break under the weight of it all. Then, abruptly the vision halted at the root of another mountain, flew upward and stopped on an unfamiliar, but natural mezzanine, where a bustling city came into sharp focus.

“Nordrym,” the Goliath said.

“Is that where I must go?” Ugvec asked, not taking his eyes off the site.

Silence reigned for a long time, until he came to his senses and realized he hadn't received an answer. He found the strength to tear his eyes from the vision to find himself *alone*.

Kavaki had gone.

But ... the vision had been clear.

It was to this place—Nordrym—that he must travel.

For it was there that his destiny waited.



To be Continued...