

LARGE LIVING

BY SYLVAN SCOTT



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Macaferty Jahn didn't understand newcomers and hated their slang. He knew it probably wasn't universal but they all seemed so ... insulting. They were as bad as the terrmorah and trolls even if the newcomer in question had been transformed into a member of a much smaller race such as his own. He'd met tahvic newcomers and they all possessed perplexing ways of speaking and thinking. Most of them didn't even put their family name before their given name. It was insulting to one's lineage and disrespectful to the adopted tahvic race. While charging into battle, following the ill-conceived tactics of a newcomer wizard, he resented them even more. Accidentally, his feet crushed a wooden wagon as he launched himself at the enemy line.

Like all tahvic, Jahn understood the role of relative size. Only three feet high—under normal circumstances—he constantly had to deal with creatures larger than himself. Of all the Twenty Peoples, only the thaylene were smaller than a tahvic. But despite the elemental arcana that could warp and twist the status quo into virtually any configuration, no tahvic worth the name would ever resort to growth incantations. Regardless of size a true tahvic would eagerly confront any of the bull-like terrmorah in a fair fight. More times than not, the tahvic would win. Trolls, if not so damnably proud—a trait that the tahvic shared—were also no better off for their hulking height. To one of Jahn's ferret-like people, size was merely an indicator of challenge, not something to be overcome with spell craft.

With one spell, the wizard newcomer, Aaron, had sucked all the honor out of the fight.

Snarling, Jahn kicked at a calf-high terrmorah and sent him sailing a dozen feet into a tree. It was completely unsatisfying.

What kind of name was "Aaron" anyway? It sounded like one of those effete names that the serpentine jessai'id took. It didn't have enough vowels or consonants to be a faerie name but sounded just as pretentious. Almost all newcomers to the floating islands and continents of Talvali had stupid names.

He'd met a few with a sensible tahvic name like his own -Jahn- but they were rare. A name didn't make up for their overall senselessness and disrespect.

A flight of arrows struck him in the chest but bounced off the heavy, leather shirt that had been enlarged along with the rest of him. He looked towards the

archers about seven strides away and kicked at the ground, raising a hurricane of dust, dirt, and rocks. He let out a roar as he charged but his heart wasn't in it. Soon that tiny collection of humans, dwarves, orthoc, and goblins would be ground underfoot and he wouldn't have even raised a sweat in the process. He hadn't even had to use his club, yet. If metal objects could have been enlarged by the wizard's spell, the fight would have been over even more quickly.

Aaron probably loved this.

The sky was dark with layers upon layers of clouds as well as the overhead passing of Tomin Kel. The floating island would eclipse Arvarren for the next month. But even when one of the higher islands of the Daylands, Cloudlands, or Lightlands hadn't interposed itself between the sun and a Duskland like Arvarren, the miles and miles of atmosphere and clouds still kept the land in a soft, late-afternoon twilight. Tomin Kel was big enough that, while directly overhead, cast the land below in deeper shadow. Normally it would have been the perfect environment for a tahvic. Dim light and warm air made for an advantageous battleground in small versus large people.

Thanks to Aaron's damnable spell, though, he was a blunt object. He was a giant that loomed over the landscape with as much grace and subtlety as a troll.

Aaron had arrived in Talvali during one of the sky storms that brought all newcomers. His world had lost a ten-mile wide chunk that now floated high and far away in the Lightlands. Like many, much of the air that came through with the chunk of earth had been condensed and consolidated air crystals that moored the alien land to the sky. Everything else on that new island had also been transformed. This made it typical for Lightlands. Aaron, the blunt fool, hadn't even believed that magic existed before a chunk of his vast city had gotten pulled into the skies of Talvali. He had claimed that not only did his parent world not possess the mystic force but neither had it possessed gods, dragons, or tahvic.

The last bit was the most insulting.

A steady creaking came from the castle walls. Glancing in that direction, he saw something that finally gave him pause. Near the middle of the battlefield he saw something new being wheeled into position. Tiny warriors from both sides battled each other in its wake.

A catapult. These backwater, in-bred brigands actually had a catapult. His scowl lessened. Maybe the battle would prove to be a challenge after all. It would have better if the enemy had actually possessed a black powder cannon but he couldn't choose his enemies any more than he could hammer respect into the thick skull of a newcomer. Once the spell wore off and he was back to a respectable size, he'd have words with Aaron.

He ground his foot back and forth over two smashed bodies—probably a human and an orthoc; he couldn't tell any more—and turned towards the group with the catapult. He started to run.

The ground quaked beneath his paws. Trees that surrounded the old, dilapidated castle shook and lost leaves. His eyes narrowed as he charged on the siege weapon.

An explosion of pain cracked into his chin like an upper-cut.

Jahn stumbled back and tried to clear the stars from his vision. They hadn't had time to fire the catapult and he'd not seen another on the field. Confused, he stumbled back, losing all forward momentum. A shadow rose with a low groan that sounded like creaking leather. Despite the imbalance of his sizable mass, Jahn kept his feet. He scowled. Before him stood trouble.

The brigands had no wizard —of that, he and Aaron had been sure—but that didn't mean they didn't have access to magic. Looming before him stood a terrmorah. Still growing from whatever dust, ungent, oil, powder, or potion had been used on him, the black-horned enemy wore thick, leather armor; had deep brown, shaggy fur; wielded a wooden club; and glared at Jahn from black, rage-filled eyes. He was already taller than the enlarged tahvic and continued to expand. His muscles, like most of his kind, were excessively large. His tufted tail swished behind him as he cracked his knuckles. He hefted his club menacingly.

Jahn grinned. He finally had his fight.

Tactically, he should have charged before his adversary's growth could reach its peak. But the humanoid bull presented a challenge. He didn't want to waste it.

The bandits engaged in battle with the king's legion represented a large band that had been ravaging the countryside on horseback for the better part of three years. With all the old ruins across Arvarren the king's troops had been searching high and low. As explained to him, it had been like finding a needle in a haystack (another nonsensical, newcomer adage). The Seventh Royal Legion, however, had managed it. They'd surrounded the ruin the brigands had co-opted and settled in to starve them out. That had been two weeks ago before Jahn and Aaron had become involved.

A wide-ranging bandit troop on its way back to their lair had encountered and sacked Jahn and Aaron's small camp three days before, forcing them to pursue.

They had to get involved.

The brigands had taken Sara.

Jahn felt the same about newcomers as most natives did. His experiences with them had only reinforced his preconceived notions. Amongst the newcomers there was not a single, self-reliant, capable individual. They whined,

shivered, ran, and displayed a shocking ignorance of both honor and combat. Sara had been the first he'd met to challenge those generalities.

She had come from the same world as Aaron. Unlike the bookish man, though, she understood the arts of fighting and showed respect to fellow warriors. While the arcane storm that brought them here had transformed Aaron into one of the leonine auranathi she'd remained what she said she'd always been: a human.

Her eyes were had a faint, slanted look to them and her skin color was faintly tanned. This was unusual for most humans he'd met. But despite this her short hair was an auspicious color: jet black. She was also short for a human. Most surprising to Jahn was that she had never shown weakness nor disrespect. She understood the warrior's way.

She called her combat style by an alien, newcomer word: "Bushido". While apparently an archaic art where she was from, and was mostly taught as recreation or for competition, she had taken it seriously. She had even taught others. With just a few strokes of a sword she'd demonstrated her skill to him. While sparring with Jahn her blade had disarmed him so smoothly he almost hadn't felt it. Her newcomer sword hadn't even broken his skin.

He'd fallen in love with her that very minute.

Had the brigands not attacked in the night like the cowardly mongrels they were, she never would have been taken. And had they not cruelly deprived her of her weapons he knew she would not need his help. Sara could handle herself just fine.

They brigands, with Sara and half their belongings in tow, had broken through the blockading legion to rejoin their forces inside the old castle. The foolish, old gryphon commanding the Royal Legion was clearly to blame. So poor was the royal morale that the soldiers hadn't even cared when Aaron and Jahn showed up to offer their aide.

No one ignored a tahvic if they were smart.

Right now, though, he feared for the fate of his friend. He knew what dark purposes kidnappers would probably have for Sara. And while he felt sure she'd make more than a few of them eunuchs should they try, he felt honor-bound to fight for her freedom. Right now that freedom was being threatened by his growing enemy.

The terrmorah before him seemed to recognize Jahn's intent to let the spell finish its course even as he swelled past three times the tahvic's height.

Terrmorah were normally two-and-a-half to three times the height of a

tahvic. It was clear that whatever magic was in use it was more potent than Aaron's. When the terrmorah stopped growing, the bull stood five times taller than Jahn; nearly twice as tall as the nearby high towers and old battlements. The bull snorted and wiped the back of his hand across his muzzle. The big warrior looked down on Jahn with contempt.

"Surrender," he rumbled. "Surrender and you shall live to see another day."

Jahn continued to smile. He didn't respond. He didn't need to. Jahn simply bowed, gripped the heft of his own club, and sprang forward.

The terrmorah swung his huge weapon in an arc over his head but was not prepared for the lopsidedness of his expanded weight. The blow was too slow and Jahn was upon him before he was ready. Aaron had said something during his wizardly studies that the magic being tapped probably addressed hosts of issues that came with excessive size: disproportionate mass, ligament tension, the ability of the heart to pump blood through such a vastly larger body... Jahn had ignored his theorizing. Magic was magic.

The tahvic's leap was shorter than it should have been but as he'd been enlarged for the better part of a half hour, now, he knew enough to compensate. His club struck the terrmorah's knee with a resounding crack. His adversary bellowed in pain and stumbled back. One of his hooves slammed down next to the catapult, crushing two of its handlers.

Jahn didn't hesitate. He leapt again and dug his small claws into the terrmorah's left leg. Straining, he tightened his grip with hefts of shaggy hair. He reached as far as he could and swung his club again. This time he aimed for the leather codpiece his opponent wore. He struck a glancing blow. At the same time, another explosion of pain sent him tumbling from his perch.

He tasted blood in his mouth and his vision was blurry again. The terrmorah had swung his club down across his body, scraping off the giant tahvic like a bothersome cat. Muscles straining, the terrmorah charged. His challenge cracked like thunder as his charging hooves crashed against the ground.

Jahn rolled to one side. Narrowly, the black hooves missed him. As he spun his body into a standing position, his head swam. This fight seemed more brutal at its larger size. Normally two hits to his head wouldn't make him so prone to dizziness. He'd have to talk to Aaron about that, too. At the same time, his opponent was also much stronger than any other terrmorah he'd ever faced. The bull wasn't as skilled but had a surfeit of raw power.

Jahn took several steps back and crouched. A scream and the crunch of tiny bones beneath his left foot let him know that someone on the battlefield hadn't moved quickly enough. The terrmorah laughed.

"Why don't you speak, little one? Is fear is revealing your people's true

nature at last? Your cowardice will be legendary after we drive off the king's legion!"

Fury rose. The terrmorah were known as rage-filled brutes but clearly this one also knew how to elicit that emotion. Jahn had his pride as did all tahvic. The taunt stung. Still, he also could not allow his anger to cloud years of skill and training.

He gritted his sharp teeth and charged his foe.

The terrmorah gripped his club tighter and raised it above his head. His movements made it clear he was being more careful this time.

As Jahn came into his shadow, the giant swung the weapon down.

Jahn made himself small.

The giant tahvic dove forward, curled into a tight ball (still managing to crush a few of fleeing brigands), and rolled between the terrmorah's hooves.

The intended blow overshot and the giant stumbled.

Jahn un-tucked and swung his weapon at the back of the terrmorah's ankles. The wooden club cracked heavily against the joint. All of Jahn's not inconsiderable strength went into the blow. A small amount of Sara's training maximized the impact. As the bull bellowed in pain, Jahn sprang to his giant paws and struck again, this time at the other ankle. The second blow, stronger than the first, broke bone. The terrmorah roared but could no longer stand. He stumbled forward. Seizing the opportunity, Jahn leaped and climbed the creature's legs. He scaled the giant as far and fast as he could in a few seconds. Then, he cracked the enlarged terrmorah over the head and sent him flailing into the old castle wall. The building, even in its prime, had been built to withstand catapult fire. It had not been built to handle tons upon tons of falling terrmorah and tahvic.

Flagstone, granite blocks, and ancient concrete shattered in all directions. Cries of fear and dismay from the brigands mingled with shouts of triumph from the legion. The catapult was abandoned by its handlers as debris rained down from the hole in the castle wall. The enemy defenses were laid bare.

Jahn strode forward and kicked some rubble aside. His enemy was still moving. He placed his club at the nape of the terrmorah's neck.

"You should surrender now."

The commander of the legion, aging gryphon that he was, proved as inept at capturing fleeing brigands as he was commanding the siege. Of the hundred or so who had made the castle their home, thirty had been allowed to escape. If Jahn had been in charge, each would be in chains or dead.

Hours had passed and he was finally reunited with the one newcomer who

wasn't an idiot. Sara knelt, showing him respect by looking deeply into his eyes. Jahn averted his own to spare her honor at having been the subject of a rescue.

"Thank you, Macaferty Jahn; you have done your family and mentors proud."

Jahn smiled thinly. "You were amongst them," he said. "How could I not offer you what meager aide I could provide?"

She embraced him and pulled the now normal-sized tahvic to her chest. He returned the gesture as a token of affection that he'd learned these newcomers respected. The two continued their embrace as members of the king's legion strode about the battlefield either looting corpses or rounding up straggling brigands.

Aaron approached from afar. He'd been consulting with the legion on using his magics to capture as many of the brigands as possible following the main battle.

"That was amazing," he cried. "Did you see what my spell did for you?"

Jahn broke the embrace and looked up at the leonine wizard. "I did see it, yes," Jahn replied. "How could I not?"

Aaron was practically beaming. His tufted auranathi tail swished behind him like that of an eager dog. "I may still be new at some of this magic stuff but I'm getting better all the time! Next battle, I'll see if I can extend the duration; make it last longer than just an hour!"

Jahn scowled. "I don't think that will be—"

"And the captain: Sir Haulivan? He just offered us a job under his command! He wants to present us at court as advisers to the Royal Legion! I was in his tent not ten minutes ago and he said he was impressed by my spell-casting. How incredible is that? We'll be living large from now on!"

The tahvic sighed. He pulled away from Sara, his fingers lingering in hers. She watched him with a hidden smile. Jahn walked up to Aaron, hands on his hips. Aaron, coming out of his excitement, finally looked down at the scowling tahvic. His enthusiasm was un-dimmed. "Uh, isn't that great?"

Jahn punched him in the groin.

Turning to the sound of Sara's laughter he strode back to her. "Large living is overrated," he chuffed. "Now get your pack; there are proper adventures to be had."

Within the hour the three of them departed from the ruins of the brigands' castle. Accompanying them was an over-looked, shrunken termorah. Aaron's spells worked both ways and taking the pint-sized termorah with them as his ward was all Jahn had requested in payment. He'd been a worthy opponent and the formerly giant beast could maybe be taught some proper respect. He was

embarrassed by his tiny size but he'd adapt to it. In the meantime, though, Jahn didn't apologize for punching Aaron nor did Aaron request it.

It looked like the newcomer was learning.

The End