

AFTER THE SPELL WARS

Book One

OGRE CASTLE



ROBERT VARDAMAN

Ugre Castle

Book 1: After The Spell Wars

Robert E. Vardeman

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

OGRE CASTLE

© 2009 by Robert E. Vardeman

ISBN 978-1-934841-34-1

Cover art © Brad Foster

Cover design ©

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

“Zumaya Otherworlds” and the griffon logo are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX. Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vardeman, Robert E.

Ogre Castle / Robert E. Vardeman.

p. cm. -- (After the spell wars ; bk. 1)

ISBN 978-1-934841-34-1 (alk. paper)

I. Wizards--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3572.A714O47 2009

813'.54--dc22

2009004126

Chapter 1

The storm had built in ferocity for three days. Violent hurricane winds beat into the side of the castle and made the very stone tremble in fear. Sheets of icy water hammered the shuttered windows and crept through unprotected slits to form puddles on the floor. No candle flame was safe from the wind and water oozing into the castle of Lord Northdell.

But the violent storm off the Mother Ocean did not make the young lord shake with terror. It took more. Much more.

The sandy-haired man, hardly out of his teens, swung around, sword cutting through the chilly air in his study. The blade sliced harmlessly through...something.

“Go away!” he cried. “Let me be!”

A howling not born of the wind rose to haunt him. Lord Northdell pushed away from his desk and twisted on his hard wooden chair, sword ready. He screeched in abject horror when he saw the beast that had slipped into the room.

He leaped to his feet and lunged clumsily. His sword tip wobbled, and he slipped in a puddle of rainwater that had blown between the cracks in the castle wall. If his enemy had been a mortal beast, even this awkward attack would have drawn blood. It might have slain.

The beast let out a roar that shook the foundations of the castle and pounced on the prone ruler. Lord Northdell dropped his weapon and shielded his head with both arms. Tears of rage and fear formed in the

corners of his eyes as he waited for the savage claws to rip the flesh from his back.

He felt only the frigid wind buffeting the walls.

He lifted his head, tears streaming unabashedly down his cheeks. His servants worked through the night, and his bride-to-be rested in her quarters in the east wing of the sprawling castle. Still, such behavior was not becoming to the heir of Zoranto the Magnificent, descendant of warriors and kings, potentates of the Plenn Archipelagos and the Mother Ocean surrounding them.

“Fight, damn you! Why can’t you fight instead of running away?” He levered himself up to his elbows and peered into the gloom. A solitary red beeswax candle guttered on his desk. The only shadows cast were his own and the familiar ones he remembered so well from his youth. Of the ferocious creature with the curving, saliva-dripping fangs and the wicked claws capable of gutting a man he saw nothing.

But then, he never did. The ghostly monster appeared, threatened and vanished as if it had never been. Lord Northdell knew it was here, though. The runaway beating of his heart proved its existence.

He moved away from the rainwater puddle, unsure now if it was only water—he had soiled himself on other occasions. He brushed himself off and shivered, not wanting to check for the source of the dampness.

He retrieved his sword and walked around the study. The creature had, indeed, vanished without a trace. As it always did.

He froze when he heard a baleful moaning in the corridor outside the heavily barred door. He pressed his ear against a thick oak panel and strained to understand the words.

“Freeeee meeeee!”

Lord Northdell gripped the sword hilt so tightly his knuckles turned white.

“I want to die!”

The young ruler shoved the locking bar aside and jerked open the door. Standing less than a pace from him was a hideously deformed man, his face covered with warts and open, running sores. One eye had been gouged out, leaving behind a bloody socket. A war ax protruded from the side of his head. Lord Northdell didn't bother to itemize the other injuries. There were too many.

“Go away. Leave me alone!” he pleaded.

The mutilated figure turned away and shuffled down the corridor, left leg dragging as if from intense pain. The howls of outrage again echoed through the castle.

Lord Northdell watched until the ghost reached the junction of two large hallways. It made a snappy right face and started down the intersecting corridor.

The man's mind broke. He let out a scream of fury that rivaled any spirit's. He rushed down the hall, sword cutting empty air. He skidded around the corner and saw the back of the battle-ax-embedded head. He slashed to take it off. The blade passed harmlessly through the figure. The ghost never turned to face its attacker. Death had come long ago during the Spell Wars, and it was doomed to forever roam the ways of Castle Northdell. Nothing the new lord did mattered to a phantom already eternally damned.

Lord Northdell rushed the ghost, trying to lock his arms around its body. He felt a flash of heat then stumbled and fell on his face. He looked up and saw several of his guests seated around the large dining table in the

great hall. They stared at him with varying mixtures of amusement and apprehension.

He couldn't keep himself from laughing. Six of the seven at the table were living, breathing humans. The final guest was a ghost who wolfed down food from the others' plates. Each mouthful fell to an insubstantial belly and plopped onto the table or floor with just enough ghostly digestive scum on it to make it inedible.

"Lord Northdell, I must protest. This is no way to greet your betrothed!" protested an ample man at the end of the table. "My daughter is unused to such...to such..." The man sputtered for the appropriate words and failed as the voracious ghost brushed past him and dragged a sticky tongue across his plate. Wherever the vaporous tongue touched, the metal plate smoked ominously.

"Squire Denbar, my apologies." Lord Northdell couldn't take his eyes off the hungry ghost. It continued to devour anything remotely appearing to be food. "You must understand my outrage at this, but there is nothing I can do."

"We depart for our village when the storm blows over," said Denbar. "This is no place for one so lovely as my Kalindi."

"Please, let us not be hasty, good squire," spoke up the lord's adviser. "The marriage has been arranged these thirty years. It is to everyone's benefit." The adviser cocked his head to one side and moved closer, whispering in the squire's ear. The way the fat man's eyes widened with greed told Lord Northdell that even more had been offered for his daughter's hand.

Lord Northdell had no objection to the dealing. Squire Denbar was obese and waddled. Kalindi floated like a svelte spirit. Her regular features were not displeasing to him, and the platinum-blond hair that he

had at first mistaken for the purest white had been festooned with small black pearls from their village's oyster beds. Around Kalindi's slender neck dangled a strand of shining nacreous pearls and a heavier gold strand laden with brilliant red and blue stones of a variety Lord Northdell could not identify.

The young lady was a worthy match for any lord, even if the marriage had been arranged ten years before either of them had been born.

"My lord, whom do you fight?" she asked. Her voice was soft, musical and enchanting.

Lord Northdell stared at the sword he still gripped fiercely in his hand.

"I fight any who would frighten you," he said, hoping this was a gallant-sounding reply.

Kalindi sneered slightly but said nothing. Her azure eyes drifted along the messy table to where the ghost slithered like a misty snake over the upholstered seat of a chair, its long, black, sticky tongue working at crumbs clinging there.

Lord Northdell started to brandish the sword at the ghost, hoping to make it go away. He stopped before he humiliated himself.

His father had died, probably of incurable nastiness, only a month earlier and had sent word for his only surviving son to return from exile in the hills of Loke-Bor. There had never been a reconciliation between them.

The new Lord Northdell wondered if this wasn't another of his father's many vicious jokes. The castle's infestation of specters was far worse than he remembered from his childhood. A few miserable haunted souls had walked the battlements then, giving an air of mystery and chronicle to the immense pile of tumbled-down stone. He had been exiled by his father for seven

years. In that time the number of apparitions had multiplied beyond all reason.

He knew the castle had been the site of many violent, bitter battles during the Spell Wars. How so many had died here, and why they had decided to remain and haunt it eluded him. A simple pass of his sword was not going to scare away any ghost in this thrice-damned castle.

He had never fully explored it since returning and had no desire to know what walked the halls after he futilely barred his doors.

Lord Northdell ducked when the ghost flung a half-filled wine goblet at him. The purple liquid streamed out, staining the table and his guests' clothing. A single drop splashed onto Kalindi's snowy white gown.

"Stop that!" he roared at the ghost. "Get out of here and leave us alone!"

The ghost looked up, as if surprised. Its huge mouth parted in an ugly grin. Then food began to disgorge from its mouth. The noxious stream spattered Lord Northdell and clung with a ferocity that defied all logic to the front of his tunic.

He went berserk again and charged the spirit, sword swinging wildly. The blade passed through the grinning head and cleaved deeply into the wood chair back. Lord Northdell lurched forward and tried to grapple the misty monster. The ghost danced away and began throwing food off the table. A new geyser regurgitated outward and splashed over the young lord.

His advisers jumped to their feet, each shouting conflicting advice. He ignored them all. He wanted blood, even if he wasn't likely to get it from a phantom. He struggled ahead, fists swinging. The ghost backpedaled and then simply vanished.

“Come here and fight!” screamed Lord Northdell. He calmed, realizing how ludicrous he appeared, not only to Squire Denbar but to Kalindi. Turning to apologize, he found himself unable to speak. Fear clogged his throat and turned his insides to ice water.

The ghost crossing the great hall carried a mace in its left hand and a morningstar in its right. Halfway to the table the massive apparition started swinging the morningstar, its chain and spiked ball whistling menacingly.

“It’s only a ghost,” scoffed Squire Denbar. “You’re pale and shaking. I’m not sure I want my daughter marrying such a cowardly sort as you.”

The spiked ball crashed into the table an arm’s length away from the squire—and did not stop. The heavy ball broke through the wood and crashed into the stone floor, fat blue sparks leaping in all directions. The ghost whirled about with an agility belying its size and caught one adviser in the middle of the face with the mace. The man sank to the floor, dead from the single blow.

“It...It’s real!” cried the squire. “There’s substance, flesh, bone!” He yelped as the ghost snapped the morningstar back into attack position.

Lord Northdell bleated like a goat for his guards. Two halbardiers blundered into the great hall, saw the ghost, dropped their weapons and fled. The sergeant of the guard proved more stalwart. He drew his broadsword and attacked.

Metal crashed into metal, staggering the guardsman. He was a veteran of combat and spun away, keeping his balance and maintaining a position to use his heavy broadsword.

“Kill it!” cried Kalindi. “It threatened my father!”

“It’s threatening us all, milady,” panted the guards-

man. He parried a mace blow, stepped forward and kicked at the ghostly crotch. His foot found nothing but mist. The sergeant danced back in time to have his sword yanked from his hands by the morningstar's heavy chain.

"How can it be so solid?" demanded Squire Denbar. "It's a damned ghost!"

Kalindi shrieked when the ghost reached over and gripped a handful of the snowy fabric at her throat. It yanked, exposing milky skin. A second hard tug bought forth a glimpse of even more intimate flesh. She shrieked and tried to flee. This only caused the rent in her dress to lengthen.

Lord Northdell scooped up the fallen broadsword and brought it down in a vicious arc that ended against the handle of the ghost's mace. The weapon flashed from the insubstantial hand and crashed into the far wall. It sizzled and popped and melted in seconds. The ghost roared its displeasure and turned from Kalindi, hand going for the morningstar it had momentarily tucked into its broad, metal-studded belt.

The young ruler now faced an enraged ghost wielding a swinging, flashing morningstar.

The sergeant came to his aid. The guardsman dived at the ghost's knees. He slipped through the vaporous creature but disturbed it enough to thwart its attack. The apparition turned and fled, bellowing as it went.

"Enough's enough!" cried Lord Northdell. "Sergeant, get a platoon of men here immediately. We're going after that!"

"Sire, please," the guard pleaded. "We can't kill it."

"We can drive it off. It ran from us, didn't it? It'll run even farther when a score of armed men set upon it."

Squire Denbar made weak mewling noises. Kalindi tried to comfort him as she struggled to hold together her ripped gown. The necklace of pearls, gems and gold rested in the soft vee of her breasts. Of the four others attacked, one adviser lay dead, head crushed like an eggshell under the boot of a conquering warrior. A second had been seriously injured and bled profusely. The other two had fled.

Lord Northdell ignored them—and his own fear. If he did not come to grips with the spirits haunting his father's castle, it would never be his. And it would, he vowed. He had been humiliated and reviled much of his life, by his father, by everyone in Loke-Bor. He had to show them he was capable of ruling.

"Sire, your guards," said the sergeant, his voice almost quaking with fright.

Lord Northdell sputtered. He had asked for twenty. Nine had responded.

"You will be given land and a yearly stipend for your loyalty," he said. "After the ghost!"

He raised the broadsword and tried to gesture strongly with it. The heavy blade tipped forward. He couldn't prevent it from crashing into the stone floor.

The men milled about, then summoned their flagging courage. They started after the specter that had interrupted the meal of their lord's guests.

"Lord," pleaded the sergeant, "it's going into the north wing of the castle. Let's abandon this foolish quest."

"We stop it now," Lord Northdell said through clenched teeth. He saw red because of his towering rage. The heavy broadsword turned lighter in his grip, and he pushed through the soldiers and took his place at the head of the war party.

And war it was. He'd accept nothing less against

the infestation of phantasms in his castle. *His* castle.

Lord Northdell shouldered past his men, swatting at the free-floating ghosts that drifted in and out of rooms, some with open doors and others with permanently barred arches. Each step gave him new determination and courage.

“We’ll get them. We will!” he cried loudly, so that the men following could hear and take heart from it.

He expected a cheer in response. When nothing came, he turned. No one followed him.

“Cravens! Fools! How dare you abandon me?”

He stormed back along the corridors he had already traversed. His anger faded and apprehension mounted. Blood smears marked the way. Some pools of blood came from under locked doors to rooms unseen since the end of the Spell Wars. Lord Northdell stopped and mewed like a small child when he saw his sergeant’s fate.

The man’s feet dangled knee-high above the floor. The chimerical creature holding him by the throat tossed the soldier aside when it saw the lord of the castle.

“I will eat you!” the creature roared.

Lord Northdell backed away from the ogre. When it rushed him, he swung the broadsword with a strength born of fear and desperation. The sharp blade caught the ogre just above the knee and severed heavy bone and thick muscle. Ichorous black blood gushed forth as the ogre fell, hands groping.

The stench from the monster gagged the young lord. He dropped his sword and backed away, sure that he had slain the beast. Nothing survived such a massive loss of blood. The corridors were flooded with the thick, inky fluid.

“Kill you!” the ogre bellowed, hands still clutching.

Lord Northdell watched in stark terror as the ogre

rose and hopped toward him, more furious than injured. He turned and ran, not even stopping in the great hall to see how Squire Denbar and his bride-to-be fared.

He barred the door to his study and leaned against it, sweat pouring from him. For the first time in his life, he welcomed the familiar roar of the hurricane outside the castle walls. The storm was less likely to harm him than the apparitions haunting his castle.

His *father's* castle.

[*Ogre Castle* by Robert E. Vardeman, published by Zumaya Otherworlds February 2009. Available in trade paperback at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble Online and from your local independent bookseller, and other online retailers