

The Troll
A Story of The Young Rangers
by Robyn Paterson

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Rob

The troll came over the rise.

Dark green muscled skin. Eyes like coals. Taller than decades old trees. The thing lumbered along the forest path in huge gaping strides that Thorin could feel through his knees. It was like someone was dropping rocks onto the ground in front of him- huge, heavy rocks.

From his vantage point in the bushes, Thorin watched, and tried to focus his breathing. He wouldn't be able to make the shot if he didn't breathe properly. Tremors ran along the bow in his hand, betraying his inner feelings, and he forced himself to ignore it, trying to stay on target.

He had chosen this. It was his choice to be here.

Now the others were counting on him to make the shot.

Arrows would penetrate a troll's thick hide, but they wouldn't hurt it. He'd been told that it was like putting arrows into a tree- a little penetration, but no real damage. No, in order to hurt this monster he needed to aim for its weakest points- the eyes, the joints, or the throat. Any of these would at least hurt it, and Thorin and his comrades could work from there.

Myra was the best shot among the young rangers- she would aim for the eyes. Thorin, as the next best shot in the trio would aim for the throat. Feena, the least skilled with the bow of the three ranger cadets would aim for the legs in hopes of slowing it down.

And all of this would only work if they acted as one single, timed unit.

As the troll approached the chosen point, Thorin began to pull back on the bow.

His eyes no longer focused on the flower that marked the place where the troll would fall, but on the beast's throat, which was encircled by a necklace made of tiny bones and animal skulls. It was almost like a target, and Thorin aimed for the center...Waiting...Waiting....

NOW!

Timing his shot with his breath, Thorin unleashed the arrow.

At the same time, from their chosen hiding places, Thorin heard the twanging sounds of other arrows being loosed.

The troll seemed to sense something was wrong, and actually stopped and gripped its necklace in its hand, but it was too late- the arrows were already on their way, and its fate was sealed. Nothing could save the troll from the deadly shafts but a miracle.

And then, one happened.

As Thorin watched, the arrows they'd unleashed were suddenly flung aside by a mighty gust of wind that sent them clattering off into the trees! It was like an invisible hand had reached out and swatted them from the air.

Mouth agape, Thorin stared.

How was this possible? Could this be real?

He froze, he wasn't sure what to do.

From their hiding places, he saw the other two ranger cadets emerge. On the other side of the path, Myra was standing now, her blonde hair shining in the sun as the slender elf girl began to unleash a torrent of arrows at the beast with amazing speed. Feena was behind the troll, and she too rose from cover,

firing as quickly as she could. Her stocky muscled form tiny compared with the troll, but she stood near it undaunted- like a child facing down an adult.

However, no matter how many arrows they threw at it, the same thing happened- each of them was knocked aside while the troll just stood there and watched them, a growing snarl on its lips. Then the snarl turned into a howl of anger and it let out a mighty roar, raising its club-axe into the sky.

Then it charged right at them.

#

When Thorin had been roused early that morning by his adopted sister, Myra, the last thing he expected was to be in the middle of a war by the afternoon.

But that is what had happened.

Even before the oatcakes were finished, a messenger had come to the house and let them know that Thorin and Myra were to report not to their school, but to the archery grounds on the edge of the city as soon as they could- kitted for travel and battle.

Thorin and his sister had looked at each other in wonder, but they'd done as they were told. They were cadet rangers in the Black Woods Clan, and it wasn't unusual for them to be summoned to surprise training exercises. But this felt different, although Thorin wasn't quite able to say why.

When the two had arrived at the archery grounds, they'd found over thirty of the village's best warriors there, along with men and women hurriedly preparing horses and other equipment. In the chaos, they'd found their teacher easily enough- Ranger Hastur's bright red bandanna was easy to spot in

this sea of green and brown. The third member of their cell, Feena, was already there with him.

"Alright kids," he said to them, taking them aside. "You always complain we won't let you actually see real action. Well, today's your lucky day. I've convinced Captain Redleaf to let the three of you come on today's mission." Then, when he saw their faces he added..."But! Only as runners and observers. You're not going to see real fighting if I can help it, especially not today!"

"Yes!" Feena grinned wolfishly. "This is going to be great!"

But Thorin wasn't so sure. "Sir, why do you say "especially not today?" What kind of mission is this?"

Hastur tugged at his beard, "Well now. Today's a bit of a special one. I can't say I've ever seen the like of it. Scouts have spotted a bunch of trolls marching on Havensford- maybe twenty of them I've been told."

Trolls.

Thorin felt his legs begin to shake at the mere mention of them. Trolls were huge, nasty creatures who lived in the uninhabited Southern Reaches and were part of the reason why few men did. It was said a single troll was equal to a dozen armed men in battle, and just the whisper of their creed was enough to set most people's hearts racing.

"Really?" Feena gasped. "That's amazing! Can you believe it, we're going to see real trolls!"

Hastur shook his head. "Not if I can help it, cadet. You three will be staying with us in the command group."

"But," the energetic girl continued. "We'll see dead ones,

right?"

Again, Hastur shook his head. "Our mission is to convince them that this isn't the right course of action- by force if necessary. Let's hope we won't have to be killing any of them at all."

"Sir," Myra said, speaking for the first time since they'd arrived. "Are trolls not solitary creatures?"

"Aye," Hastur agreed. "Which is why I said it's a strange day. I've never heard the likes of of a Troll war-party. Goblins, yeah, and sometimes they get a stupid troll to help them, but Trolls don't do this kind of thing on their own."

"So why are they here?" Thorin asked.

Hastur laughed. "If I knew that, boy. I'd send them back to their mothers for a spanking. Now, get some horses from the stable and be ready to ride when the horn sounds. And stay close to me, understand?"

#

"You want us to do what?"

Hastur looked at them with deep sincerity. "I would not ask, cadet, if I didn't think you and the others were ready."

Thorin shook his head. "But we..." He started, and not finding the words, he looked at his teammates. Feena just shrugged, but Myra addressed their mentor.

"Sir, you did say we wouldn't be seeing combat."

Hastur smiled. "You were the ones who wanted action, now you have it." Then he paused and addressed them in a more serious tone. "Look, I'm not asking you to fight this troll. We don't know why, but it's left the pack and is heading for that

farmstead to the Northeast. Your job is to get to that farm ahead of it and warn those people, that's all. There is no battle involved here. Only warning the farmers and returning."

The trio looked at each other, then nodded to their leader in unison.

"Yes, Ranger!"

At that, Hastur pointed toward their mounts. "Ride them to the edge of the forest, then leave them. They'll return on their own."

"I just hope we return too," Thorin mumbled to himself.

#

Once they'd left their horses, the trio began to jog through the forest at high speed. Their long days of training giving them the stamina they needed to move quickly and silently through the nearly impassible thick brush and woods.

It was that silence that first let them hear the troll.

A distant cracking sound, like trees being felled, and the cries of birds rising up into the thick air of the late summer afternoon. After they'd heard it, Thorin sent Myra up a nearby tree, which the wood-elf girl leapt up into with fluid grace, jumping from branch to branch.

She was down moments later, letting herself drop to the ground in front of them without making a sound.

"It's east of us," she confirmed. "Moving toward the settlement. We can out-pace it with little difficulty."

Thorin nodded. "Good. Now that we know where it is, we can steer clear of it."

"Steer clear of it?" Feena looked at him, surprised. "Why would we do that? It's big. It's slow. And, we know where it is. I say we ambush it."

Thorin looked at her, wide-eyed. "But our orders..."

"Our orders are to keep that thing from hurting those farmers, and we can do that a lot better if we take it down."

"Uhhh," Thorin rubbed the back of his short red hair. "I don't know..."

Myra nodded. "Sister, you are being reckless. We cannot defeat a troll. We are not experienced enough."

Feena snorted. "It's a troll! Big, stupid and slow. We just need to put a couple arrows in it. If it looks tougher than we thought, we can retreat, but we've still slowed it down- maybe made it change its mind about the farm. But if we succeed...hey...we've got us a troll! Think about the look on their faces when we tell Hastur that! No more kiddie-table for us!"

Myra looked at Thorin. "You are the leader of this cell, and it is your decision. But, I advise caution."

Thorin made a grunting noise. "Crap..." Feena made it sound so easy, and as he thought about it, it could work...Should he do it?

After a moment's thought, he made his decision.

"Okay, let's try it."

After all, what could go wrong?

#

Thorin dived to the side, avoiding the powerful club-axe as

it splintered the trunk of the tree behind him, and continued on out the other side. The mighty tree fell around him, but Thorin managed to scramble out of the troll's reach- for the moment.

As he watched, Feena ran past, a hunting knife in each hand as the short and solidly built girl leapt up into the air with a feral scream and tried to bury the knives in the troll's lower back. But, the troll was already moving, and where his back had been was now a mighty fist swinging around at Feena with surprising speed. Thorin saw the ranger girl bring her arms up just in time to absorb the blow as it struck her, and then it sent her arcing back and out into the forest.

Thorin was on his feet in a moment, running as fast as he could away from the deadly giant. As he ran, he scanned the forest for Myra, but saw no sign of the elf until he heard the troll scream again.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Myra had alighted on one of the trees above the troll and was raining arrows down on the angry beast. The arrows still weren't even getting close to it, but they did act as a distraction, which Thorin knew was exactly what Myra was giving them. She was faster and more able to elude the beast than her human partners, so she made the perfect one to keep it occupied.

With this in mind, Thorin dashed in the direction he'd seen Feena fly. If she was hurt, he needed to get to her while the troll was still chasing Myra.

He found Feena pulling herself out of a thicket, and looking none the worse for wear. She smiled when she saw him coming.

"You seen my knife? I lost it when that rock hit me."

Thorin shook his head. Sometimes he wondered what this girl

was made of.

"We need to get out of here," he told her. "Myra will try to lead it away, but it might come back."

Feena sneered. "Ain't you worried about your precious "sister"?"

"She's not the one with rocks in her head."

#

"I say we take another whack at it," Feena said. "We've seen what it can do, we try and take it down."

Thorin and Myra looked at the girl in disbelief.

"Sister, I believe your course of action is reckless." Myra said, in as direct a manner as the stoic girl ever got. "We failed in our previous attempt because of the troll's magic, and any further attempts are also likely to have similar results."

"It's that necklace," Feena answered, and held up her knife. "Let me get it off him, and you can fill him with arrows."

"We cannot be sure of that," Myra shook her head. "Magic comes in many forms, he may even have a forest spirit aiding him that we cannot see. We are not trained for this, and we should return to our original mission. Do you not agree, brother?"

Both of them looked at Thorin, who looked away.

"I..." He hesitated. "I don't know..."

"Some leader your are," Feena spat. "You forget how to use your brain and your bow?"

Thorin just stared at the ground, turning red.

"It is not an easy decision," Myra said, moving to stand beside him. "We must consider all the options carefully."

"Yeah, I..." Thorin said, thinking as quickly as he could. "I think we can..." Then he steeled himself, forcing his words past his inner doubts. "I think we have to do both."

"What?" The other two looked at him in surprise.

He'd started it, Thorin decided, so now was the time to follow through. "We need to warn the farmers, and slow down the troll so they have time to evacuate. If we don't, the farmers might not have enough time to get away."

Then he looked at his Elfen sister. "Myra, you need to go to warn them. You're faster than either of us, and we're just slowing you down."

"But..." It was the Elf girl's turn to hesitate. "They may not believe me..."

Humans had a love-hate relationship with Elves, and this had caused Myra quite a bit of trouble in the past.

But Thorin shook his head, "Just show them your colors and your badge, they'll believe you."

"Yeah points," Feena put in. "If they don't, just threaten to shoot them yourself. That's what I'd do to get them moving."

Thorin rolled his eyes, but said "Well, you might not want to go that far, but do what you need to do to make them believe you."

"Will you not need me here, to help?" Myra looked him in the eyes, "I am the best archer among us."

Again, Thorin shook his head. "We'll manage. You just need to get going and warn them. Okay?"

At last, the Elfen ranger agreed, and Thorin watched her depart with only a single worried glance back.

Then he looked at Feena.

"How sure are you about the necklace?"

"Does a bear crap in the woods?"

He considered it. They had two options really- attack, or try to lure it into a trap. The problem was there wasn't enough time to make a trap that would stop something that big, at least not a conventional trap...

"You have a plan?" He said.

Feena grinned.

#

Thorin was already regretting this.

He was standing alone in a clearing with the troll before him- so close he could hear the chuffs of air and see its nostrils flaring as its small black eyes peered at him, and then glanced warily around the clearing.

This troll was no fool, Thorin decided, then considered that foolish trolls were often dead long before they could reach the size this one had. He'd managed to stop the troll by just standing there alone with his bow ready- if he'd known it was this easy, he'd have done it before.

But his rest wasn't long, and the troll began to stride toward him across the grassy space- necklace of bones tinkling as each step brought it several feet closer to Thorin until it

was looming overtop of the young ranger. Then it stopped, and looked down at him, a slightly puzzled look in its eyes.

It's wondering why I haven't run, thought Thorin. I am too.

Then the Troll leaned in, and bared its teeth at him- a wave of hot, stinking breath blowing against his face. It hissed. A challenge? Or maybe a warning?

Either way, Thorin didn't react, he just stood there, his bow ready to fire at the beast, and the two of them stared at each other.

Then the troll's eyes went wide and it suddenly reared back, twisting around.

Thorin took this as his cue and began to back away, and the troll's spinning revealed a smaller form was now attached to its back- Feena! Riding the bucking and twisting troll like a tiny child riding on her father's back.

Thorin heard a torrent of swearing, and then saw the reckless girl drop to the ground and roll away. She waved the troll's necklace in her hand, and shouted "I've got it! Shoot him! Shoot him!"

It had been Feena's plan to distract the troll like this, and he hoped it worked. In a quick motion honed by long hours of practice, Thorin raised his bow, took aim at the troll, and fired. The troll was following the retreating Feena, so Thorin had a clear shot at the back of its huge knees, and despite their movement, he was sure he could score a hit.

But, as he watched, the arrow was again knocked aside by an invisible force.

The plan was a failure, the necklace wasn't the talisman they'd hoped it was!

Even worse, as he watched, the Troll's club-axe sliced the air where Feena's head had been a moment before. In this kind of open area, the Troll was faster than they were!

Panicking, Thorin realized he had to do something and began to run after them. Slamming his bow onto the clip on his back, Thorin pulled out his knife, the only thing that seemed to work on this creature, and ran in. He thought maybe he could distract it- jab it in the back of the leg. But he feared this would be more like a mosquito bite than a critical blow.

Then the unthinkable happened- Feena was just a bit too slow and the club caught her shoulder. Her body was suddenly sent tumbling across the grass to where it lay- unmoving.

Every curse he knew went through Thorin's head, but he knew that if he focused on her, he would only be assigning both of them to the funeral pyre. Instead, he let the adrenaline surge push him to run faster, and jumped over a rock to bring his hunting knife down into the troll's calf as hard and deep as he could.

The troll screamed, this time in pain, and while the knife didn't do much damage, it definitely got the creature's attention. It swung around, Feena forgotten and those dark eyes now on Thorin.

Eyes filled with murderous rage.

#

Myra watched the farmers pack to leave.

It had been difficult to convince them at first, but her official ranger sigil and sincerity had broken through their prejudice. It also helped that someone had earlier reported hearing the sounds of warfare to the east where the main force

of Rangers was engaging the trolls.

Then a noise caught her attention, and Myra turned to see a couple leading their crying child from a nearby house. They looked like tenant farmers, and their child was yelling up a storm.

Myra went over to them, and all three of them suddenly froze, the parents watching the elf with caution while the child stared at her in wonder. Myra leaned in to the open-mouthed child and said "Do not worry, little sister, it's just for a little while. Until the storm passes, you need to be brave for your parents. Can you do that?"

It took a moment, but the little girl nodded her head.

"We're sorry to trouble you, ranger." Said the mother. "She's just a stubborn child sometimes."

Then the little girl looked up at her mother, "But Apple's in the barn! What about Apple?"

"Apple will be fine," her father told her. "You'll see her when we come back."

The child looked at Myra again, "Will you protect Apple?"

Myra nodded. "Of course I will. We rangers are sworn to protect everyone."

At that, the girl's mother began to shuffle her away, and the child waved at Myra as she left.

"You don't need to worry," said the father. "Apple will be fine. Don't bother yourself with it. Really."

Myra caught an odd tone in his voice, and couldn't shake the feeling he was nervous about something the child had said.

"Of course," Myra nodded. "The people of this settlement are my responsibility. The livestock are too difficult to move."

Looking slightly relieved, the man said his thanks and left to join the parade of people heading north into the hills. But, there was something about the way he acted that bothered Myra, so once he was gone, she went to the barns behind the headman's house.

Slipping inside the dusty building, she could hear the livestock moving around and grunting, and walked among the stalls. It was a normal barn, and the animals here were what one would expect to find in any farming settlement. As she walked past the pigs, she wondered which of them might be Apple- perhaps a piglet? That would be the thing a farmer's child would worry about. Well, she'd do what she could to steer the troll clear of this place, if it came to it.

Then, as she was about to leave, her eyes fell on the final stall going wide with shock at what they saw.

#

Thorin leaned Feena against the tree- trying not to make anything worse.

"I'm okay," the girl kept chanting, but it would have been more convincing if she didn't keep coughing up blood.

"Let me check you over," Thorin said, defaulting to his training. He had always been good at the medical side of the Ranger arts, and for once that might actually be useful. With gentle fingers, he poked and pressed the girl's sides and arms, and then suddenly leaned forward and stuck his ear to her ample chest.

"H-hey!" Feena blushed, "W-what are you doing!"

"Be quiet and breath as deeply as you can," he ordered and for a moment the only sound in the forest was that of the birds and insects. Then he said, "I think you broke a rib, but it's not poking into your lung. You also broke your left arm and your shoulder, but I'm not sure how bad. The healers should be able to help, but we'll need to get you home."

Feena shook her head, "We can't go home. The troll is still out there."

Thorin frowned. Their attack had done little but get Feena injured, and even he was lucky to have escaped the Troll's wrath by hiding from it in the forest. After it couldn't find him, it had scanned the skyline and then resumed its northeasterly course.

"There's nothing we can do," he declared. "That necklace wasn't the source of its power, and we don't know what is."

"It's the club," said Feena with certainty. "It's gotta be the club." Then she paused, "Or its loincloth...or boots..." Listing off the only other two objects the troll had, "No, it's gotta be the club."

Thorin generally agreed, it did make sense to put protective war-magic on a club, especially for a species like a Troll, but... "It doesn't matter, there's nothing we can do. Myra's at the settlement by now, and we've slowed it down. Our job is getting you home."

Feena looked at him and then shook her head in disgust. "No wonder they call you Thorin Shaking-leaf," she said. "Hastur was crazy to make you the leader of this team."

Thorin, who was starting to rummage through his carry-pack, just nodded. "You're right. I don't know why he made me the leader. It's not like I can do anything useful like you or Myra.

I'm not a very good ranger."

Feena nodded. "You got that right, if I was in charge..."

Suddenly Thorin's head snapped up and he looked at her with sharp eyes. "If YOU were in charge? Feena, you WERE in charge! This was YOUR idea to attack in the first place. I'm not a bad leader because I suck at fighting- I'm a bad leader because I listened to YOU instead of following orders."

The ranger girl stared at him, open mouthed. "I..." Was all she could manage.

"A good leader takes care of their team, and I screwed up." Thorin said. "So now, let's do the right thing and go home."

Then Thorin went back to his pack, and found the map he was looking for. Unrolling the vellum scroll on the grass in front of them, he took a minute to figure out where they were, letting his finger slide across the map. He found the nearby mountain peaks, and then the place they had started and followed that up toward the settlement along the river, noting where they had likely encountered the troll.

They weren't far from the settlement now, and he traced his finger along the river that ran just north of them until he came to... Thorin's finger stopped, and he cocked his head in thought. Then he looked at the ranger girl, who was watching him carefully.

"Feena, do you still have that troll necklace?"

Feena blinked, and then reached into her side-pouch. "Yeah, I'm gonna show it to the kids when we get back. Watch 'em freak out."

That made Thorin nod again. It was possible then. They could do it.

"Feena, I have a plan, but I'm going to need your help."

"A plan to get us home?"

"A plan to stop the troll."

#

Thorin ran.

He ran fast and hard, letting his instincts guide him through the forest. The long hours, the training day and night-it had all been for this, and now that training was all that stood between the young ranger and certain death.

Behind him, the troll thundered along, its long legs making up for the slower strides as it chased after Thorin- chased after the bone necklace the ranger boy wore draped across the back of his neck.

But Thorin couldn't worry about that now, he could only worry about the route he had planned so carefully in his head. Turning right at the tree with the cut, turning left at the rock with the mark on it, and leaping over the log he'd marked with an errant branch. Every point brought him closer to his goal, and every step seemed to bring the troll closer to him!

Finally, with the troll's grasp only inches from his throat, he hit the edge of the dry riverbank and leapt into the air. Green and brown were traded for sun-bleached white and grey stones as the ground fell away underneath him, and the dropoff at the river's edge left him hurtling through the air. Despite the dropoff of several feet, he didn't have time to stop and climb down, and could only hurl himself into the air and hope that he could make the landing.

When he came down, his foot slipped, but he managed to keep himself from falling by dropping into a shoulder roll on that

side and come up running without losing any momentum.

It was a close thing too, for as he came up the troll exploded from the bushes in a mighty crash and landed where he'd been only moments before. The mighty beast was too single-minded to be concerned about the change in surroundings, and continued its mad rush at Thorin, but this time there was no series of obstacles to slow it down- it was a straight flat run to the other side of the river, and the troll had the advantage.

Still, seemingly heedless of his poor situation, Thorin ran. When he hit the thin wide trickle of a stream, he began jumping from rock to rock. Using each of the small boulders as a bridge to avoid the slowing grasp of the muck, hopping his way across the water.

Of course, the troll didn't care about getting wet, so it continued its rush after him as it hit water that just barely came up to its knees. It slowed the beast down, however, and that gave Thorin the moments he needed to get a head start as he rushed toward the forest cover of the far side.

But, instead of running, Thorin stopped on a rock halfway across the green water and turned to face his pursuer. In a single motion, his bow was in his hand, and an arrow, one of his last, was being drawn back.

He loosed it.

The arrow shot harmlessly over the troll's head.

This caused the wading troll to pause for a moment, surprised by his prey's sudden change of heart, but only a moment, and then the troll let out a roar and was rushing at him again like a charging bull.

There was little Thorin could do but dodge, and he did,

jumping to another rock, and using the boulders as cover to slow his pursuer down. As long as he stayed ahead of the now-slowed troll, and kept the large rocks between them, he was out of the troll's reach.

And then, the unexpected happened- as he was leaping between rocks, the troll scooped up a chunk of floating wood and threw it at him. The driftwood caught him just as he was landing, knocking him off the rock and sending him tumbling into the river.

Surprised, Thorin splashed around for a moment, and struggled to get his feet under him. When he finally did, a shadow loomed over him, and he was forced to dive aside as the trolls club-axe cleaved the water where he had been. Frantic, all Thorin could do was try to put one of the boulders between him and the troll, but now the troll was the one with the advantage, and it easily maneuvered around the smaller human to keep him from escaping.

Then the troll's huge hand was gripping Thorin's chest and hauling him from the water, pulling him out to slam him against one of the boulders. Thorin let out a cry of pain as he was pinned against the rock and for a moment the world went black, then it returned to blazing color as he found himself face to face with the troll.

Dripping, hurt. The two faced each other.

Thorin was surprised to find he wasn't afraid. His heart was beating hard, but he didn't feel fear- only determination. For once, he had done his job. For once, he had acted like a real leader. He thought of his father, and hoped that this final sacrifice would be enough.

The troll raised his club-axe, and Thorin turned his head

and closed his eyes. As he did, he wondered whether the sound of thunder that rushed in his ears was the sound of his heart or...

Then he and the troll were both swallowed by a wall of water.

#

Thorin's first sensation was the feeling of lips pressed against his.

Then his eyes shot open as he coughed and gasped for air, clutching at his throat. He remembered the thunder and the drowning blackness, and now... He was alive?

He looked over at Feena, who was kneeling next to him.

"You owe me," she said, wiping her mouth with her arm and spitting.

Thorin rasped. "You owe me for being so damn slow. I told you to open the floodgates on the dam when you saw my arrow."

Feena tapped her bandaged arm in the sling. "One hand, remember? It was stuck."

After a moment, Thorin nodded. "Yeah. It's okay. Good work."

"You're welcome."

He looked around the riverbank, seeing only rocks and wood.

"Did you see it? Where is it?"

Feena shook her head. "I only found you. The water probably washed it downstream."

Thorin pulled himself to his feet. "We'd better check."

They found the troll a short time later, its green scaled

chest heaving as the creature lay face-up in the shallow water at the river's edge. Its club-axe was nowhere to be seen, and one of its arms was bent at an odd angle.

"It's hurt," Thorin said, watching the bruised and battered creature.

He heard a knife being drawn. "But it ain't dead...yet."

Thorin watched his teammate step forward, preparing to cut the creature's throat. He couldn't help feel sorry for it, and reached out to grab her arm.

"Maybe it will leave now," he said. "It's hurt. We should just let it go back."

"Go back?!? Are you crazy?" Feena shook off his hand. "Who knows how many people this thing has killed? Look, if you can't handle it, just go over there. I'll do it."

"No," Thorin stood his ground, stepping between her and the troll. "It's a living thing." He doubted he was in any condition to stop Feena, but he felt he had to try. He was done letting her push him around. "We need to respect that."

"It's a killer," Feena stared him down. "A killer, a monster, and a..."

"...a father." Came another voice, and both of them turned around.

From the forest, Myra emerged, and behind the elfin girl a small troll dressed in rags followed.

"Or mother," she continued. "This is Apple. Its child."

As Thorin and Feena watched, the young troll rushed past them to the larger one, kneeling down next to it and began to wail. The larger troll, awakened by the sound of the little one,

opened its eyes and lifted a hand to stroke the arm of the wailing child.

"I found her in the human settlement," Myra continued. "I believe they were using her as a slave."

Thorin considered. "Maybe that's why it came here. To get this child back. The other trolls are just trying to help this one get back its child. This was a rescue mission."

"Trolls ain't smart enough for that," Feena commented, but Thorin shook his head.

"Yeah, well, looks like they are."

Then there was the sound of wood cracking as the larger troll pulled itself to its feet, towering over the rangers. Holding the little one to its side, it looked down at the three, its lips pulling back to reveal snarling teeth.

"Put your knife away." Thorin ordered Feena.

"But..."

"Do it."

With a snarl of her own, Feena thrust the hunting knife back into its sheath at her hip.

Summoning his courage, Thorin stepped forward and pointed downstream, toward the Southlands.

"Go," he said.

He doubted the troll understood his words, but it seemed to get his gesture, and then it took the little one's hand and gave the humans a final snarl before it turned and left.

Watching it go, Thorin felt conflict in his heart.

Had he done the right thing? Trolls were trolls, and this one was clearly dangerous.

And yet, as he watched the display of parental love before him he couldn't help thinking that maybe they weren't so different from humans after all. So, maybe there might be hope yet.

Fatigue began to take him again, and he almost fell over, only staying up when Myra helped to steady him.

"Are you okay?" She asked, her large brown eyes filled with concern.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'll be fine."

And, for the first time today, he meant it.

FIN

Author's Notes:

There is an old saying, "the villain is the hero of the villain's story." Everyone thinks they're the good guys, or at least convinces themselves they are. While Thorin, Feena, and Azure are doing what they believe is right, there is no doubt that the Troll was as well. The Troll was trying to rescue his child from humans who were using it as a slave.

Who was right? Who was wrong?

Everything in life is a matter of perspective.

#

If you want to know more about the author, you can check out my blog at Robynpaterson.com where I post about my stories, writing, art, podcasting, culture, history, and whatever I think is interesting. You can also subscribe to my blog, which will let you hear about the latest posts.

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Thanks for reading!

Rob

In this next installment of this YA Fantasy series, the trio of Thorin, Feena and Azure find themselves trapped in the cabin of Albinus Wurt- the legendary Trapmaster of the Black Woods. Can the three escape? And what's that rattling noise they hear in the walls? [Click here find out!](#)



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