

Tales of Elves and Trolls

THE CRYSTAL GOBLIN



by Joshua Blanc



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The Crystal Goblin

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The Crystal Goblin**

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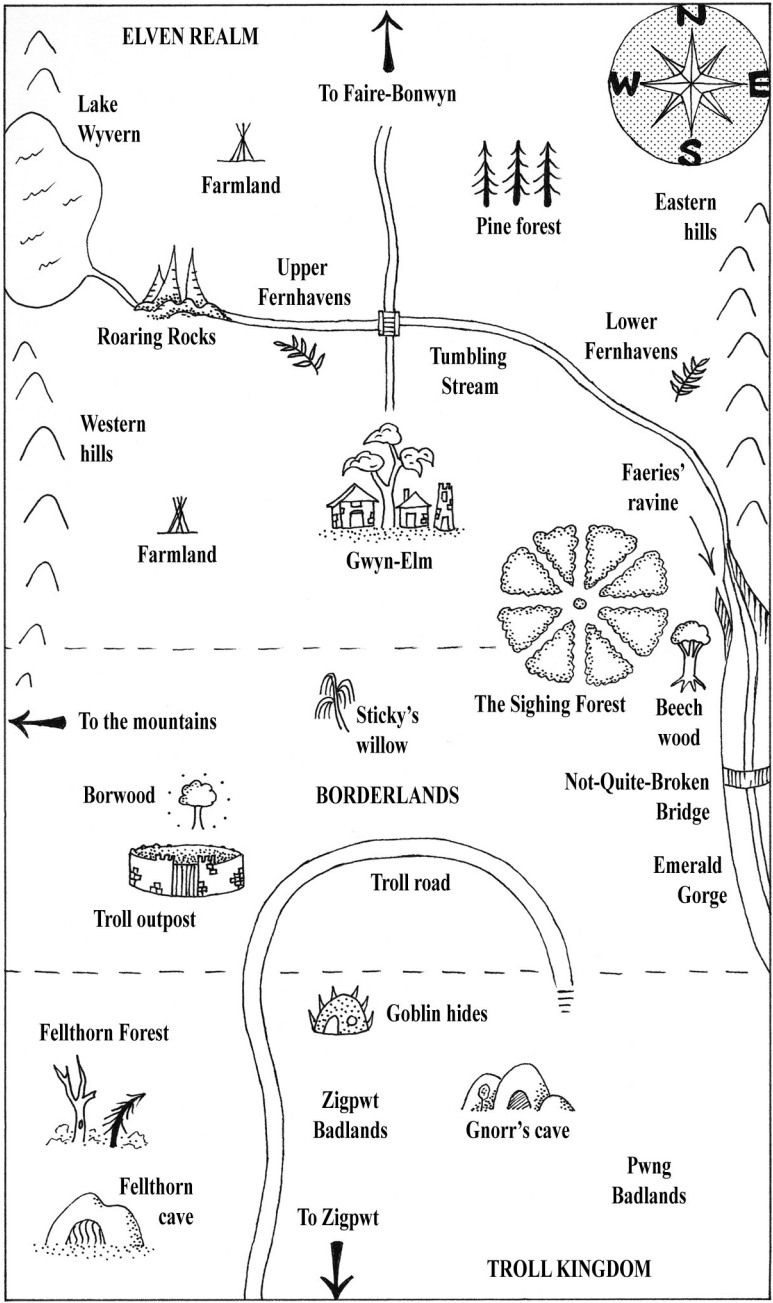
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About The Author

This book is dedicated to:

My parents, Ron & Karon,
for helping me realise my goal,
and Alice Wells,
who inspired *Finding Faeries*.



Foreword

Exactly when and exactly where these tales transpired is unknown. Some scholars will tell you the likes of ‘elves’ and ‘trolls’ have *never* existed, nor are they likely to in the near future. Others will say they dashed-well have done, in a time so long past that recorded history seems to have ignored it (or failed to spot it in the first place). But scholarly types are often so narrow-minded in their views that they contradict each other – and themselves. And I should know, since I am oft accused of being what amounts to a scholar these days....

Faeries, a term under which all manner of creatures of folklore have been classified, have woven themselves into the cultural tapestries of peoples of the world for time immemorial. Our highly educated minds of today are just as likely to dismiss the possibility of their existence, past or present, as they are to entertain it. Here we are presented with a volume of stories, fanciful in nature, yet ringing with a certain seed of realism that begs the question: from where have these magical creatures sprung? The overly fertile mind of a humble wordsmith? Or somewhere ... other?

The author of the works in question has been strangely silent on the matter, which is why I’ve been asked to put forth my own opinion; based on my studies of all Things Archaic. To be quite honest with you, the reader, I have no conclusive answer to give. I can merely present the theory that perhaps there exists a plane of awareness to which we aren’t yet privy. A place where magic exists, where faeries frolic, where elves and trolls and – yes – even goblins live out their fantastic lives; oblivious to our modern world and its technology. Perhaps it is as well. Perhaps we can learn a little from their stories and leave them happily in peace.

Yours in befuddlement,

Professor Theodore Gimmit, Department of Archaic Things,
Foxglove University.

Preface

When I created the characters Sticky and Lora, in 2004, I never expected their adventures to continue beyond *To Go In Search of Trolls*; their first adventure together. Sticky had played a small role in *Troll Tree Removers* before that, a story inspired by the destruction of some local trees. I liked Sticky, and thought it would be fun to see where he ended up after his troll masters had been given their just desserts. It seemed natural to link the two stories, while keeping each separate enough to be enjoyed on its own. As more adventures, more characters, and a more complex plot developed, it became harder to keep the stories self-contained. So while some stories may focus on characters other than our unlikely duo, they remain an integral part of the tale; making for a most unconventional novel.

Sticky and Lora's first outing soon lead to a sequel, *Return to Gwyn-Elm*, which introduced several new characters. The seed of a larger plot developed in the course of the story, and resolving it would prove as much of an adventure for me as for Lora and company. *The Tree Enchanters* grew out of a desire to explore Allstaff's character, with no thought of his exploits being linked to future events, as became the case. *The Crystal Goblin* followed, addressing the larger narrative head-on. *Not-Quite-Broken Bridge* was inspired by a photograph of a collapsing rope-bridge. Seen frozen in time, it suggested the two halves were still connected – if only by a thread.

Somewhere along the way, it became apparent that *I* wasn't writing these stories anymore: the characters were. I provided the basic plot, of course, but getting me from point A to point B was Lora herself, or Gnorrr, or Sticky, or one of the many other misfits that fill these pages. If they disagreed with a particular idea in my storyline, then they weren't afraid to have things their own way. For me, one of writing's greatest rewards is to bring life to characters as vivid and real as these. I care very much for them all.

As far as mythology goes, any defining principles that govern what is 'elf' and what is 'troll' are only loosely followed. I prefer

to take elements of these unwritten guidelines and extrapolate on them, weaving my own unique world. If we all stuck to the rules the world would be rigid, and I much prefer it soft and bouncy, don't you?

These stories were written with pen and paper initially, then typed and edited in word-processors in subsequent drafts. I wrote them at my home in British Columbia, but the Elven Realm owes as much to England's woodland as it does to Canada's boreal forests. England's countryside and its ways have long been an inspiration to me, even though my first visit wasn't until the autumn of 2006. It was there the idea of *Finding Faeries* presented itself, although it wasn't written until my return home.

The longest story in this collection, *The Forest's Last Sigh*, was written in my garden the following summer. Mosquitoes and other outdoor pests weren't my only trouble, for I had myriad loose ends to tie up. There were times when Lora and company went off on tangents, and it was all I could do to rein them in. But in the end, they succeeded in delivering quite an epic – as short stories go.

The last story written for the collection was *Troll Watch*, when I realised a large chunk was missing from the middle of the story. Leave it to Gnorr to deliver the goods, for not only do we hear about the Troll Watch, but an adventure involving a dragon as well. But I'm getting ahead of myself. It's best, I think, to start at the beginning of the adventure....

My thanks to the following people for their help along the way:

The collective readers of the Fan Base Alpha cult-media forum: it was your enthusiasm for the initial drafts of these stories that inspired me to write more.

Steve Wilkins, Helene Wells, and Stevie K. Farnaby and family: thanks for making me feel like part of the family. My time in England with you will always be treasured, and remains a fountain of inspiration.

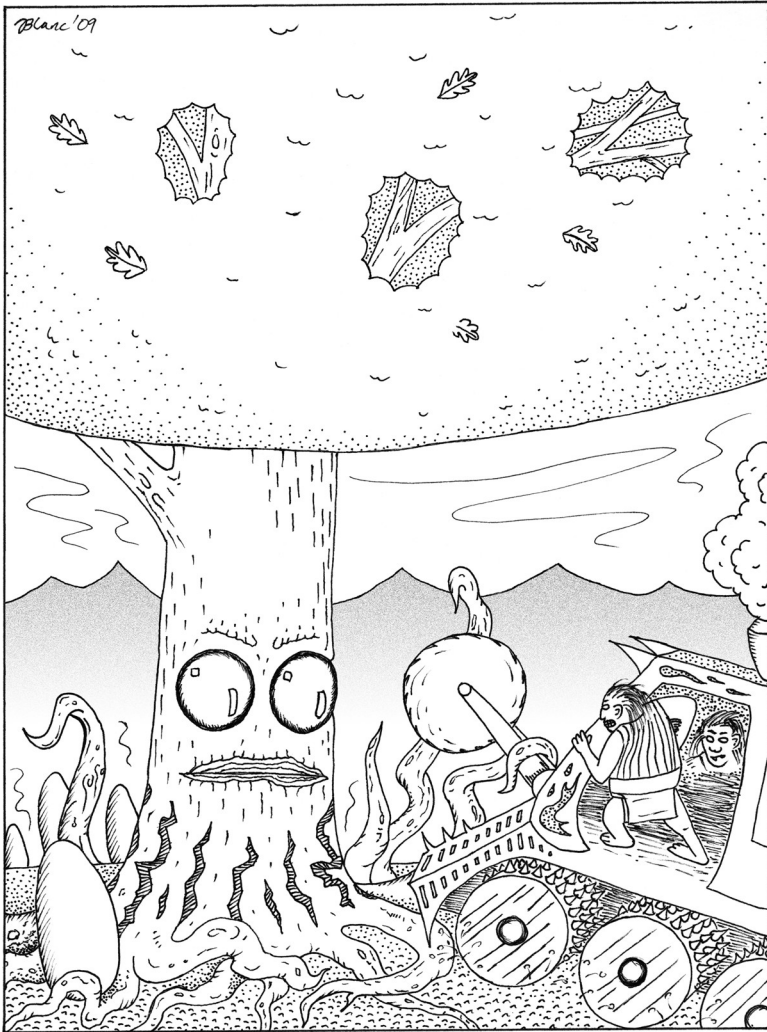
P.S. Gifford, who spins a fine horror tale: you may take a bow, sir! Thanks for your feedback, and for inspiring the grumpy gnome that appears in *The Tree Enchanters*.

Alice Wells, who was so receptive to these stories before they were published: looking for faeries at Bewlwater was such good fun. We'll have to do it again sometime!

Pam Crocker-Teed of Pam's Personal Publishing: for her invaluable help getting the book from my computer to the printed page.

My parents, Ron and Karon: extra special thanks for your constant support of my work, and for proof-reading and prodding!

Tale I:
Troll Tree Removers



Agnor became suspicious the moment he read the scroll. Actually, his secretary had done the reading, because Agnor couldn't read. Most trolls couldn't, nor did they generally need to. If – and this is a big if – the need arose, they'd find someone to

read things for them, and threaten to bash them if they didn't. In the face of such friendly persuasion, literate creatures throughout the Troll Kingdom have proved quick to oblige – only to receive a bashing anyway.

Now that Agnor and his brother were businessmen, they had to read all sorts of things via their imp secretary. Tree removers, they called themselves. It was a job they were good at, and it had several perks. Not only did it allow them to exercise their trollish nature – to bash things – but it infuriated the elves, who treat even the ugliest trees as kin.

“Read that last bit back, Sticky,” said Agnor, fist raised out of habit.

“Yes, Mr. Agnor,” said Sticky, in his smallish voice. Agnor closed his eyes to assist comprehension. “Ahem. ‘The tree can be found in the middle of the Sighing Forest, marked on the map accompanying this letter. Payment will be in the form of one hundred gold pieces, and coal enough for the journey. I trust that will be sufficient. I hope, with this venture, to pave the way for more cooperation between elves and trolls. Signed, Sydor Goldenleaf.’”

“Work for an elf?” said Runk, rubbing his creased temple. “It not strickly done, Brother.”

“You're right, Runk,” said Agnor. He bashed his secretary, and it leapt with a yelp into its cupboard. “But dis elf promises a hundred gold pieces, plus coal. For dat, Agnor would gladly go to the heart of the Elven Realm and chop down dere biggest condominium.”

“You and your big words.”

The brothers' appearance, if we start from the top, consists of an unsightly crop of matted, straggly hair; ears that jut out from the side of the head; a broad, flattened nose; a square jaw; wayward teeth poking haphazardly from thick, leathery lips, and a hulking frame covered in tough stone-hued skin. Each wore rudimentary clothing in the form of loin-skin and vest. Agnor, at least, attempted to cultivate a business-like appearance with his tailored

pin-stripe vest; whereas Runkthussle's would be better described as the aforementioned 'rudimentary.'

"Sticky!" called Agnor.

The secretary peeked gingerly out of his cupboard, then fluttered down to the office desk. Sticky, like all imps, looked a little like a goblin at first glance. *Very little* like a goblin is how Sticky would put it. Nevertheless, he shared the slight, sinewy body; bald, bulbous head; pointed ears and chin, and beaky nose. But there the similarities ended. His features were softer, his large catlike eyes lacking the bloodshot, frenzied look, and his skin a light brown; whereas a goblin's leans towards olive green. He was blessed with a pair of small but perfectly capable bat-like wings, a short lizard-like tail, and hands and feet comparable to the talons of a bird of prey. Yes, a far superior creature to the lowly goblin, but currently no better off; having been captured and forced into servitude by the beastly tree removers.

"How can I be of service, Mr. Agnor?" said Sticky.

"Take dis down."

Sticky perched at his type-writer. He took up his typing wand in both hands, and used it to press down the large keys as Agnor dictated.

"Misser Goldenleaf, um ..." Sticky typed the 'um' as well. "We will chop down dis tree for you as soon as the sun goes down. We require the coal up front, and half the gold. We are good for it, you need only inspect the equipment in our work-yard. Have a—" Agnor always agonised over this bit. "Don't get hit by a juggernaut. Agnor."

Well, it wasn't bad as troll salutations went. Sticky finished the scroll and wound the handle of the type-writer so that the parchment fell into a tray marked 'Owt.'

"Why not take the gold and forget the job?" said Runk. "How's dis Goldenleaf going to get— What's that big word you use?"

"Compensation?"

"Yur, dat. He's not likely to come all the way to Zigpwt and knock on our door, is he?"

“If we do the job we get *all* the gold, not just half of it. Plus we get to go deep into elf territory to remove an elven tree – at an elf’s *request*. Would you be rock-headed enough to pass that up?”

Runk’s brow un-creased and he slowly nodded. “Runk hadn’t thought of it like dat.”

“That’s what comes of thinking too hard when it’s not in your job description. Okay, Sticky, send dat off.”

Sticky rolled up the scroll and flitted over to a series of cubby-holes set in the wall. He slipped the scroll into a canister attached to the leg of something sleeping in there, and rapped on the mesh separating him from the rest of the scaly creature.

“Goldenleaf, four Silliput Lane, Faire-Bonwyn, Elven Realm,” he said. Snores answered him from the darkness. “Heh-hem. Goldenleaf, four Silliput Lane ...” he repeated, louder this time.

“Outta the way, Stick,” said Runk. He bashed loudly on the grille, and there was a startled chittering. “Get a move on, bird-brain!”

The small drake in the alcove scurried up the tube and out of the shelter. The dragon-like reptile would reach the Elven Realm in a fraction of the time troll or imp could manage. The elves had long used them to send mail and messages, and trolls had been quick to train them for their own purposes.

“Dat’s how it’s done!”

When sundown came, the alarm-rock thudded into place. Agnor lumbered out of the sun-shelter into the work-yard, where his machinery gleamed in the twilight. In the drop-off shed he found fifty gold pieces, bagged, and a large pile of coal. These too had been delivered by drake. He smiled to himself, and went to fetch a shovel.

A short while later, he and his brother were rolling along the simple, well-worn track that served as the Zigpwt road, in a monstrosity of steam-powered iron and steel lovingly referred to as the ‘Tree Mutilator.’ In reality, it was a modified juggernaut bought surplus from the Troll Infantry. It hadn’t actually needed much in the way of modification. The great circular saw on the front, for slicing enemies in twain – or into thirds, quarters, or

smaller pieces – was just as suited to gnawing through trees. The people-grinder on the back made a perfect wood-chipper. The spikes and various other serrated adornments were left intact for ‘effect.’ In fact, the only modification to speak of was a sign that read: ‘Agnor and Runkthussle, Tree Removers,’ and some badly painted flames.

It clanked and groaned as it went, hissing out great clouds of steam and ash, and tore at the road with the spiked metal rollers that served as its wheels. If they happened across any road kill on the way, it would be unrecognisable by the time the Tree Mutilator finished with it.

By now other trolls had emerged from their crude stone dwellings and were lumbering through the night. The Tree Mutilator had a knack for parting traffic, and it quickly left the city behind. Soon there was no traffic to speak of along the lonely troll road.

Trees in these parts were few and badly treated, but their numbers grew as the juggernaut ploughed northward. In the light of the cab-lanterns, Agnor eyed their ghostly shapes; wishing he could rid the world of them.

Perhaps Agnor will take his time on the return journey, he thought, and make a start.

There were likely to be elven scouts lurking. They could sneak in and out of Zigpwt easily enough with their nimble bodies and stealthy steps. Agnor fancied he felt their eyes glaring at him from the thickening forest.

“Do you fink we’ll have any trouble from tree sympathisers tonight, Agnor?”

“Not if dey know what’s good for ’em. Keep shovelling dat coal, we’ve got a long way to go yet.”

They did indeed. But as trolls hadn’t much need for sleep they found it a trifling journey, as tolerable as any other. Only the trees grated on Agnor’s nerves. He flattened the small ones every chance he got, and once took a detour through a string of coppices.

Soon the troll outpost came into view. It marked the beginning of the Borderlands, where the worlds of elves and trolls frequently

collided – in battle and also much subtler ways. Forest crept in, trolls bashed it out again. Thick unmanageable stands of trees shared lodgings with patches of bare, baked earth where even grass refused to grow. Here the conflict between both races became tangible in a cruel perversion of nature.

Less than an hour before sunset, they found themselves at the edge of the Sighing Forest. They ground to a halt and peered into the eerie tangle of solemn, thick-trunked trees. They heard the sighing too, just on the edge of hearing, that gave the forest its name. Without a word, Agnor set the Mutilator into motion again; a trespasser in the Elven Realm.

Agnor fancied he could hear the path screaming as the spikes made mincemeat of it.

Oh, this is going to be one fun job, he thought.

“Ere,” said Runk. “How are we gonna know which tree it is? Dey all looks the same.”

“We’re in elven lands now. Agnor’s never seen trees like dese, and neither have you, you unobservant lump of rock. But the one we’re looking for has a rock garden around it. Shouldn’t be hard t’spot.”

“Huh. Probably someone’s house, and dat Goldenleaf has a gripe with the owner.”

“House or not, it’s coming down.”

The winding path through the imposing woods went on. The spikes tore bark from the trees if they got too close, and ripped up clumps of heather. Then suddenly the juggernaut burst into a clearing, and Agnor threw on the brakes.

The sighing had become subdued; Agnor barely heard it over the rumbling of the boiler. The lightning sky was a dim circle above them, and stark against it stood a lone tree; its trunk massive, its canopy spread wide. The Sighing Forest formed an abrupt wall around it, a hundred feet in every direction. No other trees grew near; not even a sapling. But there at the tree’s base, beyond the low-growing heather, were stones. Lots of them.

“Dere it is,” said Agnor. “Let’s get a closer look.”

He hopped down from the machine, and lumbered towards his foe. Runk tossed another shovelful of coal into the furnace and followed. As he got closer, he found himself walking on stone chippings. They carpeted the ground surrounding the tree, forming a thick mulch in which the smooth grey stones stood. The stones were many – too many for the simple mind of a troll to count.

The tree itself looked ages old, and gnarled, with thick, furrowed bark. Moss crept over it in twisting patterns, suggesting it only grew there because it had been allowed. It stank of magic, this tree – or something, at any rate.

Runk joined him, visibly frightened by the massive thing. “Runk doesn’t like the look of dis ... it’s five times as wide as the saw!”

“It’s a challenge, all right. We’re not getting paid one-hundred gold pieces for nothing.”

Suddenly two great knots on the trunk blinked open, and glowing green eyes peered down at them.

Runk fell back against one of the stones with fright. Agnor stood his ground.

“Trolls ...” said a deep voice like creaking branches. “What business have you here, in the Sighing Forest?”

“D-did dat tree just ... talk?” said Runk.

“Of course I did!” boomed the tree. “Your names, trolls, and business here!”

Agnor now saw why the elf had paid so much for the job. It wasn’t just a tree removal, it was *murder*.

“We, tree, are Agnor and Runkthussle, Tree Removers. Our business is removing trees, and tonight dat means *you*.”

The tree’s eyes grew wide. It tilted itself backwards with a great creaking and whooshing of wind, and laughed long and loud.

“Oh-ho-ho ...” it said at length. “You’ll have to excuse my laughter, Agnor, and Runkthussle. I find that very amusing. Faarenmul, for that is my name, has stood here countless years. I existed long before trolls came down from the mountains to move like a blight across this land. Yet you think you can fell me like so much timber?” Faarenmul set to laughing again.

“Runk told you dis was a bad idea,” said Runk.

“Quiet,” said Agnor. “Fetch the Tree Mutilator.”

Runk ran off, and Faarenmul’s eyes followed him curiously.

“Agnor can, and will fell you, demon tree. Behold, his juggernaut!”

As if bidden, the juggernaut clanked across the clearing, belching steam like an overweight metal dragon. Runk stopped it just beyond the standing stones.

“Impressive,” said Faarenmul. “But a termite like that won’t fell me, Agnor. Others have tried, and failed. Not even the other trees venture close enough to challenge me for my sunlight.”

Agnor looked at the sky. Dawn wasn’t far off. They would have to retreat to the juggernaut’s sun-proof cabin soon. But this tree, with its jovial defiance ... he would fell it, all right – and before sunrise.

He nodded to his brother, and Runk spurred the machine forward. It ploughed into the rock fragments, grinding them to powder, and bowled over several standing stones. Agnor leapt aboard and started up the saw. Easing it forward, he swung it horizontal. The teeth whirred in a fury, inching closer and closer to Faarenmul’s trunk.

There was a shower of rock as several roots forced their way up through the ground. The juggernaut heaved and bucked.

“Full steam!” cried Agnor, tightening his grip on the levers.

The machine jarred forward, but Faarenmul tipped it over as if it were a toy. The trolls were thrown clear, and the juggernaut’s frenzied grinding came to an end as the roots wrapped around it. Laughing triumphantly, Faarenmul extinguished the furnace with a shower of earth.

Agnor got to his feet, only to become entwined in roots that sprang up around him. Runk suffered the same fate, despite his struggles to escape the writhing tendrils.

“Foolish trolls,” boomed Faarenmul. “Look what you’ve done to my lovely garden. You owe me compensation.”

Something dropped to the ground from high in Faarenmul's branches. It straightened itself up, and Agnor looked into the face of a tall, golden-haired elf.

"Agnor and Runkthussle," it said, contempt in its voice. "Good ... day to you."

"Goldenleaf," said Agnor. It could be no other. "What is this?"

"You trolls have always been a greedy, ignorant bunch. But even I misjudged the depth of your stupidity. You accept a job from an elf, a species known for its kinship with trees, letting greed cloud your judgement. A fatal mistake in this case, I'm afraid. Nothing I can say will change Faarenmul's mind. He wants you for his garden."

Goldenleaf gave a wry smile. Agnor looked now at the fallen stones, and saw that the bases, previously hidden by rock chippings, had perfectly formed troll feet. He squirmed with fury, and the roots tightened their grip.

"Elf fiend!" he cried. "Burn in the fires of doom!"

"Not likely," said Goldenleaf. He cast a glance at the smouldering Tree Mutilator. "And I don't believe I'll get hit by a juggernaut, either."

Goldenleaf bowed to Faarenmul, wrapped his black cloak around him, and took his leave.

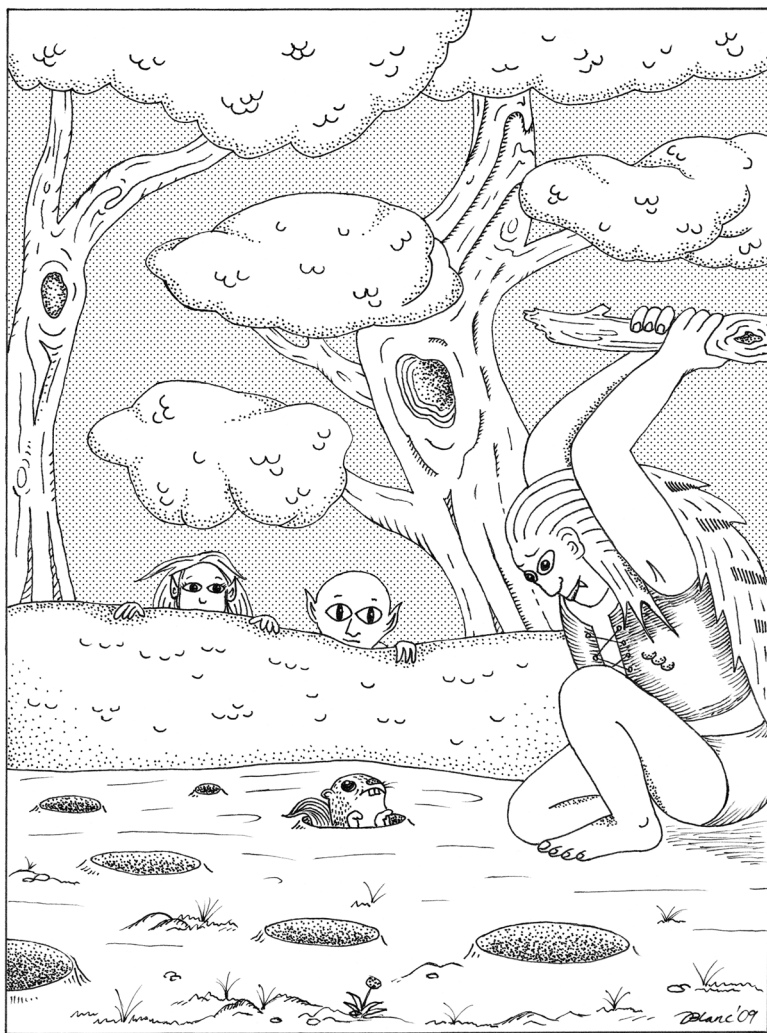
"Ah," said Faarenmul. "Here comes the sun, I can feel it."

Agnor felt it too, and his skin began to harden. He squirmed with all his might as the sun's harsh disc climbed above the canopy. The last thing he saw, before turning to stone, were two roots coming towards him.

They held hammer and chisel.

The End.

Tale II:
To Go In Search of Trolls



Part 1

Sticky the imp floated along on his little wings towards the Elven Realm. He carried a bundle on the end of a stick that the

trained observer would recognise as a typing wand. Adjusting to fresh air and open spaces had been both frightening and exhilarating, for he'd not experienced them for some time. He'd spent, oh, ages in the employ of the troll tree removers Agnor and Runkthussle. Well, 'employ' wasn't the best term for it; slavery was more apt.

Quite out of the blue, a scroll had arrived and changed his fortune. Having accepted a job from an elf known as Sydor Goldenleaf, the tree removers apparently had a fatal encounter with a sentient oak. Subsequently, Mr. Goldenleaf had arranged both the return of the money and coal he'd paid, and the 'liquidation' of the office and drakes. Sticky, to put it bluntly, was out on his ear. He was also a free agent.

So he'd gathered his meagre possessions, some food, and some gold pieces that were lying about – it wasn't as if he hadn't earned them – and fled before any more trolls could get their big clammy mitts on him. He spent the better part of a day negotiating the scraggly Badlands of Zigpwt; alert for goblins during daylight, and both goblins and trolls at night. After a fitful sleep in an abandoned crow's-nest, he pushed onward into the Borderlands; in the hope of finding more civilised work in the realm of the elves.

At midday, with his stomach growling, he stopped in the branches of a large weeping willow. He'd always been fond of willows; they were so restful and timeless. He supposed that's why trolls hate them so much – more than any other tree. His former employers had taken great delight in 'removing' as many as possible, even if they weren't on the job list. Seeing a willow as tall and restful as this was a good sign that he was far from trolls and their machinations.

From a high branch he gazed out through the curtain of leaves at a little pool that sat between the rushes and undergrowth below. The peace was shattered by a great roar. Something waving a club leapt nimbly from the bushes and beheaded several rushes with one swift blow. Sticky clambered back onto his branch, which he'd fallen from in the excitement, and peered down at the interloper. It was a little elf girl, resplendent in a shimmering green cloak over

which her long golden hair flowed in something of a tangle. Sticky scratched his head, then gathered up his bundle and floated down.

“Hello there!” he said, and then plummeted to avoid a swing of the club.

“Oops! Sorry,” said the girl. “Who is it, please?”

Sticky clambered up the stem of a bulrush and shook himself dry.

“I’m Sticky,” he said.

“Are you? I’m awfully sorry you fell in the pond.”

“No, my *name* is Sticky.”

“Oh. Pleased to meet you. I’m Lora-el-thanir, or Lora if that’s too much of a mouthful. Are you a faerie?” The girl lowered the club and peered a little closer, brushing aside some of her wayward hair.

Her face was not that of a feral child, as Sticky had expected. Her skin had a healthy glow about it, and her features were soft. It was for noses such as hers that the word ‘button’ had been invented; her wide smile made rosy apples of her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling wells of curiosity.

“No-no. I’m an imp,” said Sticky, “but you’re forgiven the mistake.” He’d been compared to far worse things.

“An imp? Wow, I’ve not seen one. You’re ever so funny-looking. Can you really fly with those tiny wings?”

Sticky, his pride bruised, proudly demonstrated the capabilities of his wings by fluttering through the air and alighting on the soft mossy bank.

“How’s that?” he said.

“I wish I had wings ...”

“Tell me,” said Sticky, as he ferreted through his bundle for some bread. “What are you, an elfling, doing out here in the Borderlands – away from the safety and splendour of the townships?”

Lora sat also, and laid her club before her folded legs. As she spread her cloak back, Sticky noticed a brooch – a leaf of gold with a crest on it – pinned to her tunic.

“I’m hunting trolls,” she whispered.

Sticky coughed and nearly choked on his bread. The girl offered him a flask. He eagerly drank from it; sweet nectar of some fantastic elven fruit.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m sorry, you said you were ... hunting trolls?”

“That’s right. My parents were killed by trolls – that’s what they told me at the orphanage – and this brooch is my only link to them. I’ve had it since I was a baby.”

“Do you know what trolls look like?”

“Um ... big and hairy. And ugly. That sound right?”

“It’s an apt-enough generalisation. The key word here is big, and quite strong besides. You’re foolish to tangle with trolls if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I’m proficient with this,” she said, picking up the club and swinging it once ’round her head.

“That I don’t doubt,” said Sticky, ducking again just in case. “But you don’t know trolls. They’re wicked, devious creatures, and I should know; I’ve been their slave for ... oh, ages.”

“Really? How would you like to help me?”

Sticky cocked his head to one side. “I was hoping to find employment in the Elven Realm ...”

“There you are, then. I’m an elf, and I’ll employ you.”

“And you can pay me, can you?”

“Oh, I’m sure trolls will have money and things. It’ll be of no use to them when they’re dead.”

Sticky couldn’t argue with that logic. He chewed on his piece of wicked troll bread a moment, then tossed the rest of it into the pool. As soon as it broke the surface, a huge catfish gobbled it down and returned to the depths of the murk.

“You have yourself a deal,” he said, and they shook hands.

Together they rose, to go in search of trolls....

Part 2

“That weapon you carry doesn’t look very effective,” said Lora.

Sticky followed Lora's gaze, to the stick that supported his bundle. "It's not a weapon, it's a typing wand."

"Wand? Like sorcerers use?"

"No, of course not. It's for typing with. You know, letters, forms ..."

"Oh. So you can't do magic, then? That's a shame. It would've been handy."

"Writing things is a kind of magic."

"You can't kill trolls with it though. I guess if you threw a type-writer at one ..."

Sticky shook his head in exasperation.

Trolls being nocturnal creatures, with no exceptions, the two troll hunters had to wait till nightfall for any to appear. They passed the hours of lingering daylight gathering a particularly strong type of vine Lora had knowledge of, and trudging deeper into troll territory.

"To be courting danger again after only having left it," Sticky mused. "Perhaps this fresh air has gone to my head."

"Are we in Zigpwt, or whatever it's called?"

"No, we're east of there. It's a region known as 'Pwng.' There are far-fewer trolls here. Apart from that, I don't know much about it. The only thing one needs to remember in troll country is that there are trolls about – and it's a fact not to be taken lightly."

"I don't like this place at all," said Lora. "The trolls have spoiled the landscape."

"They do like to bash things," said Sticky, "and inanimate objects – trees and such – don't generally put up much of a fight."

"Then I shall fight for them. Hear me, Brothers! Hear me, Sisters! I will avenge your tortured souls!"

"Shh!" said Sticky, clapping his rather small and ineffective hand over Lora's mouth. "I hear something."

Lora nodded. They crept/flew towards muted thuds and the crunching of leaf-litter. Their keen eyes peered into the gloom of a clearing, where they saw a troll – a very large one. Its dark, matted hair spilled down its back. In the curves and recesses of this singular mass, patches of moss grew. Above its broad and

muscular shoulders sat a suitably broad face, mostly taken up by flattened nose. From each corner of its mouth poked a pointed tooth – one up, one down – and its eyes had a dullness to them, like those of a docile animal.

It certainly didn't seem docile, given its current occupation. It was hunched over a small hole in the ground, with a club the size of a goat poised at the ready. A ground-squirrel popped its head out of the hole and the club came crashing down. The squirrel had obviously had practice though, for it disappeared into its hole unharmed.

The troll grunted, lifted its club again, and sauntered over to another hole – there were many dotted about the clearing.

“See what I mean about bashing?” said Sticky.

“Are they always that ... big?” said Lora, with a hint of fear and uncertainty.

“This is an outlander. They're known to be scarcer, larger, and an awful lot fiercer than your average troll.”

Lora squinted at it in the failing light; calculating, sizing it up. Sticky firmly believed that no matter how many times you carried the one, you always wound up outnumbered when it came to outlanders.

“What's the plan, Sticky?”

“Plan? I thought you—”

“I've never even *seen* a troll, except in pictures. You're the expert.”

“Wouldn't you rather start with a smaller one?”

Lora just gave him a funny look. Sticky sighed, and put his mind to problem.

“Okay. Much as it pains me to suggest this, trolls like to catch imps. They're under the impression we're 'lucky.'”

“What, like a Djinn or something?”

“You could say that. Anyway, while I'm distracting him, you can work your magic with your club.”

Lora glanced at an oak growing nearby. “I'll get up that tree – I'll never be tall enough, otherwise. You'll have to lure him over.”

“All right.”

“Good luck!”

With that, Lora shinned up the tree with the ease of a spider. Sticky stowed his bundle, took a deep breath, and flitted into the clearing.

A little should be explained, at this point, about morals. Elves have a noble moral code that is generally infallible; except, of course, when it comes to their enemies: trolls, goblins, and such-like. Trolls, on the other hand, have never bothered much with codes – moral or otherwise. Sticky? Well, Sticky was doing his job, and he wasn’t exactly fond of the brutes.

“Ho there, troll!” he squeaked.

The troll made a grunting noise, which could’ve passed for ‘huh?’ with a stretch of the imagination, and looked up from its fruitless pursuit of the squirrel.

“Ullo, an imp!” it cried, its eyes wide with glee.

The brute swung at Sticky with what must’ve once been the trunk of a sizeable tree, and Sticky dodged – just barely. He hadn’t counted on that, so, with considerable fear of being squashed flat, he fled towards the oak where Lora hopefully lay in wait.

As expected the troll lumbered after him, laughing and swinging its club. Sticky hovered now beneath the boughs, with the troll fast approaching.

“Are you ready up there?” he called.

“Almost,” came Lora’s voice. “My hair’s caught in the – nrgh! – branches.”

Swish! Sticky dodged another blow, and flitted around back of the troll. A hand the size of a dinner-plate reached around; momentum brought the rest of the troll with it. Sticky folded his wings and dropped to avoid the crushing grip of the lumpy, calloused fingers. The troll reached out again, but, with a shriek, a tangle of hair and green cloth fell upon its shoulders, accompanied by several branches. It stood paralyzed by confusion and surprise as Lora thwomped it repeatedly over the head with her club.

The girl hadn’t been kidding when she said she was proficient. The third blow knocked the troll out, but she seemed unaware of this and kept pummelling while it toppled backwards. Mesmerised,

Sticky realised he'd also end up flattened if he didn't move out of the way. He took flight, snatched up Lora in his claws, and lifted her to safety as the troll thudded to the ground. Catching their breath, they gazed upon their achievement.

Part 3

"Is it dead?" said Lora, regarding the fallen troll with her hands on her hips.

Sticky flew close – but not too close – and prodded the troll gently with his typing wand. The troll's left leg twitched. This display was hardly necessary, though, for the troll's noisy breathing was enough to wake a dead elephant.

"No, only stunned," he said, retreating a short distance. To his surprise the elf-child leapt onto the troll's stomach and began searching its tatty vest and belt.

"What are you doing?" cried Sticky.

"Eew, there's fungus growing on it."

"That's what comes of living in a dark, damp cave, I expect."

"It doesn't smell very good either."

"Yes, well, again—"

"It doesn't have any gold," said Lora with a frown.

"It's probably hidden it in a hollow log or something. Please get down."

"All right." Lora hopped down. "We'll tie it up and make it tell us where its gold is when it wakes up."

Sticky stared at Lora as she took up her coils of vine. "Are you quite mad?"

"There's twenty-five percent in it for you."

Against his better judgement, Sticky said nothing more. He simply shook his head and helped with the knots. All the while he kept half an eye on the troll's business end, which coughed and gurgled now and then as they worked.

Ludicrous, he thought. *Absolutely ludicrous*.

When they'd finished, they stood back to eye their work. The troll's two filthy, muscular legs were bound at the ankles, and the

arms were bound at the wrists with the wiry vine. It looked as effective as a wild boar hog-tied with string.

“Are you sure that vine will hold?”

“It’s bindvine, of course it’ll hold. You worry too much, Sticky.”

“It’s my survival instinct. I suppose you’re too young to understand the importance of worrying. You’ve just conked a very large and very dangerous troll on the noggin, bound it, and committed yourself to coaxing from it the whereabouts of its gold. You *should* be worried.”

Lora just frowned, and gave the troll a swift kick to the liver. The troll flinched, but remained comatose. “When’s it going to wake up?” she said.

“You did hit it pretty hard – and often.”

Lora sat on a nearby stone and propped her head on her hands. Sticky flitted over beside her, not keen on lingering so close to the troll, and took a moment to peer about the clearing. Presently, the ground-squirrel the troll had been harassing poked its head out of one of the myriad holes in the sod. It disappeared, only to reappear in a closer hole. It regarded Sticky with inquisitive eyes and sniffed the air. It clearly took him to be no threat. It shifted its gaze to the girl, and the club propped up beside her. It clearly thought this was a different matter, and disappeared down the hole again.

At last, however, it ventured out and scurried across the grass. It paused to eye the club once more, then continued towards the troll with some purpose in mind that Sticky could only guess at. Lora gave it a cursory glance as it entered her field of vision. It seemed to have second thoughts at this point, then it picked up speed and stopped just short of the troll.

Sticky and Lora both watched it now as it sniffed and pawed the air, and hopped over to the troll’s feet. It sank its teeth deep into one of the troll’s hideous toes, and tore savagely at the grey flesh. The troll stirred, then let out a gargantuan yell, fully regaining consciousness. The squirrel, having wreaked its revenge, spat a chunk of something green into the grass, and scurried off back to its hole.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” said Lora, taking up her club. The troll was thrashing about now, making great angry noises that refused to be words. Lora leapt deftly upon its heaving barrel-chest, club raised above her head.

“Lay still, troll!” she cried. “I’ve bound you with elven bindvine: the more you struggle, the tighter the vine becomes until it cuts your bits off.”

The troll ceased moving, with a defiant grunt of anger.

“What is dis?” it said, regarding Lora with confusion in its eyes.

“I am Lora-el-thanir, and you are my prisoner, troll.”

The troll frowned, then set to chuckling, which grew to laughter that rocked its body. Lora had to fight to keep her footing.

“Why are you laughing?” she demanded.

“You, an elfling, have taken Gnorr prisoner? Gnorr the Outcaste, fallen at the hands of a mere half-pint and an imp?”

“Count yourself lucky you aren’t dead, slayer of elf-kind!”

This sent the troll into another fit of laughter, until at last he had to restrain himself lest his hands and feet drop off.

“What d’you want with Gnorr?” he said at last. “He’s slain neither elf nor imp. He roams the Badlands in peace and answers to no-one. Untie him and let him be.”

“You may not have bothered the imps, or the elves, but what of the squirrel-folk; such as the one yonder?”

“Gnorr has to eat,” said Gnorr with a shrug.

Lora’s face contorted, but she seemed to be losing an inner battle to hate the wretched troll.

“Where is your gold hidden?” she said halfheartedly.

“Gold? Gnorr has no need for gold.”

“You’re lying!” said Lora, giving the troll a thump on the head with the club.

“Owwww! That hurts! Stop, stop!” Lora relented, and Gnorr opened his wincing eyes. “You don’t fight fair, little one.”

“Sure I do. I’m small, you’re huge. I had to even things out a bit.”

“Gnorr speaks the truth. But Gnorr knows where to find gold if tha’s what you want.”

Lora smiled. “No tricks, or I’ll leave you here to turn into a rock when the sun comes up!”

“Gnorr swears! Untie him, and he will show you much gold.”

Lora looked questioningly at Sticky.

“We can do worse than believe him,” he said. “But take my advice for once, and stand well back and let *me* do the untying.”

“All right, then, Stick.”

“Sticky, if you please.”

Lora retreated to the rock with her club slung casually across her shoulder. Sticky, with some apprehension, cut the vines from Gnorr’s swollen ankles and wrists with his sharp little teeth, then dashed out of harm’s reach. Gnorr stood up, flexed his arms and back, and shook his hair like a wet dog. He rubbed the sizeable lump on his head and looked warily at Lora’s club, which the girl tightened her grip on. Gnorr glanced over at his own club, and Lora leapt in front of it.

“You won’t have need of that, Gnorr.”

“Yass, yass,” said Gnorr. “But you can’t take on the Fellthorn Trolls with that club of yours alone.”

“We’ll see. Lead the way, then.”

Gnorr nodded, and began his Earth-shaking traversal of the glade. He growled viciously at the squirrel, which was watching them pass, and it scurried away down one of its holes.

Part 4

Sticky and Lora kept a wary eye on Gnorr, but so far he’d given them no reason not to trust him. He even hummed to himself in a mindless manner from time to time. Deep gurgling drones whose tunes lost themselves every few seconds; as if he forgot the song after only a few bars and moved onto another, which would disappear equally as fast.

This, Sticky thought, is why trolls don’t write symphonies.

The terrain around them, though vague in the darkness, was picked out by moonlight where the canopy opened. The trees here were older, and far more ragged. They'd survived abuse from the trolls of the region that their younger siblings could not. Now and then Sticky saw a stone that was troll-shaped; evidence of those who hadn't retired quickly enough to their sun-shelters. He'd been so engrossed in his examination of one that he flew right into the back of Gnorr, who had stopped in his tracks. Sticky composed himself, and hovered at Lora's shoulder.

"What is it, Gnorr?" Lora whispered.

The gargantuan troll moved aside, revealing an even larger figure than himself immortalized in stone. "We're here," he said, in a low tone as of a stone dragged across gravel: the troll equivalent of whispering. "This troll was once the most-feared in the Elven Realm."

The figure stood legs-apart, with arms raised as if defending himself.

"How did it come to be petrified?" said Lora.

"The Fellthorn Trolls did this."

"How awful."

"And now it serves as the entrance to their lair, by the look of things," said Sticky. "I don't fancy these Fellthorn Trolls are as accommodating as Gnorr here."

Lora went through the stone arch formed by the petrified troll's legs. "They're an awful lot smaller if they fit through here, though."

"They're notorious bandits, stealing from elves and trolls alike. Gnorr will not be sorry to see them face retribution."

Sticky waited while Gnorr found a way around the statue through an untidy fence of piled-up debris, then flitted through the arch himself. He half expected the stone giant to come to life as he passed beneath it.

Perhaps I do worry too much, he thought.

Beyond were flickering pit-fires, trodden earth, and patches of trampled grass. There were only a few straggly trees, so tortured and hopelessly clinging to life that they were painful to behold.

“The poor trees ...” said Lora. “These trolls will pay in blood as well as gold!”

“Shh!” said Sticky. “You do get carried away so. We don’t want to give ourselves away.”

“You’re right. Gnorr, where’s their cave?”

Gnorr squinted in the dim light.

“Dis way,” he said, heading off to the left.

“I don’t suppose you can tread any softer?” said Sticky.

“Urr, Gnorr try.”

With great strain showing on his face, Gnorr made the effort. He did surprisingly well, considering his size. A great stench told them they were nearing the cave.

“Eew, it’s horrible,” said Lora.

“True enough,” said Sticky. “Although I’ve grown accustomed to such odours over the years.”

“Why isn’t it guarded?” she said of the entrance, which had a cascade of creepers growing over it to keep out deadly sunlight.

“Only simpletons and the foolhardy would enter this place,” said Gnorr.

“Which does that make us, I wonder?” said Sticky.

“Uh ... you first, then, Gnorr.”

“Yass.”

Within the cave the air was still and quite foul. No moonlight penetrated, yet Sticky’s eyes quickly discerned Gnorr’s lumbering shape ahead of him; surrounded by an ever-increasing halo of light. A bend in the tunnel revealed the source of this light: crude torches of wood dipped in grease, which illuminated a circular inner chamber.

The floor was strewn with rags, and bones, and filth, but in the centre lay a glittering treasure hoard. It almost made up for the horrid smell.

“Gold!” said Lora. “And other things besides! You weren’t kidding about the riches, Gnorr!”

Forgetting their dangerous prisoner for a moment, Sticky and Lora darted forward to run their hands through the trinkets, the goblets, the coins.

“How are we ever going to haul it all out of here?” said Sticky.

“We can get Gnorr to carry some of it,” said Lora. “I don’t suppose we need it all. Although I’m sure there are lots of elves who’d like their riches returned. We could be like ... that outlaw ... ‘Rabwin’ something.”

“Not sure I follow.”

“You know, he steals from the rich and gives to the orphans. He was in all the parchments.”

“I can’t say as I’ve heard of him. Oh, Lora, you’ve dropped your brooch.”

Lora’s hand went to the breast of her tunic, to find her brooch still pinned there. They both looked down at the identical golden-leaf brooch, bearing her family’s crest, which Sticky had picked from the pile.

“Only my parents would have a brooch like that ...” said Lora.

“Someone’s coming,” said Gnorr, his words like a fall of gravel.

Sticky tried to read Lora’s face. For the briefest of moments it appeared she would cry. But she closed her fist around the brooch, and took up her club.

“Then let’s go meet them,” she said.

Sticky opened his mouth to protest, but Lora was already running down the dark tunnel. From the other end came the sound of high-spirited and probably drunk trolls. He called after her, and looked to Gnorr for support. But Gnorr too abandoned him, leaving only echoing footsteps. He hurried after them through the darkness.

Part 5

He emerged into the half-light to see a grim scene. Four of the Fellthorn Trolls, all that remained of the once mighty band, had encircled poor Lora. Though they were few, the fact that they endured was testament to the cunning and nastiness of their gang. These four were the ugliest, most ruthless and battle-scarred trolls

in these fell woods, and there was nothing they liked more than easy prey.

Sticky saw no sign of Gnorr in the shadowy glade. The trolls were closing in on Lora, and he had to do something – fast. He picked up a stone and flung it at one of the trolls, hitting it in the back of the head. Thanks to a bird’s-nest of cushioning hair, the impact had no more effect than the bite of a gnat. The troll turned, training large frenzied eyes on Sticky.

“Wha’s dis? An imp!” said the troll. “Our luck improves by the second, Brothers!”

“Grab it!” said another. “It’s good luck!”

The trolls surrounding Lora were reduced to three as the fourth bounded towards Sticky with a limping gait. Sticky took flight and perched himself in a nearby tree. The troll, small by troll standards, was a mass of matted hair and broken teeth. It hopped up and down furiously in an attempt to reach him.

Lora fended off the reaching arms and scarred hands of the remaining trolls with her club. Her reflexes proved superior, but the trolls only became angrier at each swat. One got hold of her cloak and pulled her backwards. She swung her club in vain, and another troll caught it.

“Let go, you filthy beasts!” she cried.

“Hang in there, Lora!” Sticky called. “I’ll think of something! I hope ...”

Sticky’s own pursuer was climbing up after him. He crawled out to the farthest end of the leafless branch as a sinewy arm lashed out.

Suddenly the tree swayed, upsetting Sticky’s balance. He turned to see the stone troll uprooting it with his mighty hands. He blinked, and realised it was Gnorr; half-hidden in the shadow of the petrified archway.

Sticky fluttered to Lora’s aid. She still struggled in the grasp of three very puzzled trolls, who were watching their comrade and his tree lift high into the air. Much as it sickened him, Sticky bit at the horrid hands with his razor-sharp teeth. The trolls let go, and he

and Lora tumbled free – only to have the fourth troll drop to the ground in front of them.

“Hold dem,” said Gnorr.

“Are you friend?” said the leader of the trolls, who had apparently earned the position by being uglier than the others.

“Yass,” said Gnorr. “Gnorr was humiliated by this elfling and her imp. Now he claims his revenge!”

Lora gasped. “You traitor!” she said with a scowl. She struggled in the troll’s grip.

“Then have your revenge, Brother!” cackled the leader.

Sticky shut his eyes as the great uprooted tree came swinging down towards him and Lora. Air whooshed above their heads, and the thud of impact was both heard and felt. Confused squealing and yelling followed in its wake.

Sticky opened an eye. Gnorr stood there in front of them, minus the tree. He and Lora were both alive and well, but still in the clutches of the fourth troll – who gazed dumbstruck at his comrades lying sprawled in a tangle beneath the tree-trunk.

“What is dis?” the troll said at last, rounding on Gnorr. “Who are you?”

Gnorr creased his brow. A troll should know better than to ask another troll so many questions at once.

“Gnorr is brother to Fnorr, who was betrayed by those he trusted. Betrayed by you!” Gnorr picked up the horrified troll, which let go of Sticky and Lora in order to lash out at him.

“So the statue was once your brother?” said Lora.

“Yass,” said Gnorr, “and the Fellthorn Trolls will pay for what they did to him. The sun’s coming up ...” He went over to the tree, where the other trolls were freeing their leader from beneath it. He picked them up, one by one. Struggle though they might, they were no match for his size and strength. The sun’s first rays filtered into the clearing, and Gnorr stood straight and still to await their full force. Little wisps of smoke began swirling up, and the Fellthorn Trolls shrieked with pain as their skin began to crack and harden.

“What’s he doing?” said Lora. “He’s crazy – he’ll turn *himself* to stone as well!”

“I think that’s what he wants,” said Sticky.

“He can’t very well do it until he’s shifted that treasure for us.”

Before Sticky could say another word, Lora was off again; trying to shout above the din.

“You want to live, trolls?”

“Yes!” was the unanimous reply.

“Sticky, give me a boost, will you?”

“I was afraid of that.” Sticky braced himself, clung onto Lora’s cloak, and fluttered upwards with the child.

“Sorry, Gnorr,” said Lora, and she knocked him out cold with one well-aimed blow to the back of the head. The giant fell to the ground, and the Fellthorn Trolls were freed from his concrete grip. “Easier the second time. Now, push him into the cave, you lot, or I’ll make sure you stay out of it!”

Lora hopped onto Gnorr’s chest, and the trolls did as they were bid. Together they pushed, and Gnorr was propelled caveward at great speed. The agonized trolls still cracked and hardened, and by the time they reached the cave’s mouth they’d slowed to a crawl.

Sticky and Lora passed through the ivy curtain, and then the movement stopped.

“Come on, put your backs into— Oh.”

Gnorr was safely in the shade, but the Fellthorn Trolls were only halfway through the curtain – petrified.

“Poor things.”

“Wait a minute, I thought you wanted them dead? They did kill your parents, after all.”

Lora sighed. “I don’t think I’m really cut out for killing trolls. I do hope Gnorr is okay.”

“Uurrgh,” came a gravelly voice. Gnorr stirred, and opened his stiff but still serviceable eyelids. Sticky and Lora beamed down at him.

“I feel ...”

“Yes?”

“Heavier.”

Lora hopped off his chest.

“That’s better,” he said with a smile.

Part 6

When Gnorr was fit enough to move, they all returned to the treasure chamber. Light from the replenished torches showed the extent of his sunburn.

“Bits of Gnorr will be flaking off for days,” he explained, “but he’s had worse.”

Most of the day was spent fashioning sacks out of the rags that were lying about, and filling them with the Fellthorn Trolls’ ill-gotten gains. Lora found both her parents’ brooches, and kept them safe in her money-pouch. Sticky put his secretarial skills to work and made a mental inventory of everything. He took only a few small things for himself: rings, precious stones, and the like.

“I do wish I had my type-writer,” he said.

“Are you sure you won’t take more?” said Lora, regarding his pathetic little pile.

“This will do just fine. I don’t wish to be weighed down with more than I can carry.”

They had now filled several sacks with gold, and had the rest of the treasure sorted into neat stacks.

“Do you suppose it’s okay to leave it here?”

“Who would steal it?”

“Well, I would.”

“Yes, but how many headstrong elflings adept in the art of club-warfare do you know?”

“I see your point. Well, come on, Gnorr. Let’s get these sacks to the orphanage.”

“Righto,” said Gnorr, with a stiff salute.

Lora giggled, and picked up the smallest of the sacks while Gnorr slung two over each shoulder. Sticky tied up his little bundle, and carried it with his feet until he could retrieve his typing wand. Together they made the trek to the entrance of the cave. Soft moonlight filtered through the gaps in the curtain where the four

Fellthorn Trolls still stood, looking quite ridiculous with nothing to push.

“What shall we do with them?”

“Leave it to Gnorr,” said Gnorr.

Gnorr picked up a petrified troll under each arm, and took them out into the clearing. Sticky and Lora watched him arrange them and then return for the others. He placed them in an arc around the entrance to the cave, facing away from it. They now looked as if they were fleeing for their lives from whatever lay within.

“That ought to scare away any brave treasure-hunters,” said Sticky with a wink.

“Hur-hur-hur,” chuckled Gnorr.

They headed for the archway. Once through, they paused a moment. With the moonlight shining full on the face of poor old Fnorr, Sticky could now see the likeness between the brothers.

“I’m sorry about your brother, Gnorr,” said Lora.

“Gnorr thanks you. Fnorr wasn’t always bad. Gnorr will always remember his good side.”

Lora hefted her club; she seemed to have something in mind. Sticky watched in surprise as she walked forward and laid the club respectfully at Fnorr’s stone feet. Sticky smiled, and bowed his head with the others for a moment of silence. Then, one by one, they moved off; eager to return to the denser, happier forest.

They hadn’t gone far when Lora began feeling the weight of her sack. She dropped it to the ground for the third time, and Gnorr’s giant hands gently reached down for her.

“Hey, what are you doing? Whoa!”

Lora was whisked into the air and deposited on Gnorr’s shoulders. She clung to a tuft of his matted hair.

“Better?” said Gnorr.

“Um, yes. Thanks.”

Sticky shook his head. In all his years of living with the trolls, he’d never once met one that was civil – let alone kind. He flitted up past both their heads, and took the lead.

By the time they'd reached the ground-squirrel's glade Lora had fallen asleep, and was using Gnorr's head as a pillow. Sticky signalled to stop, and went to fetch his bundle from behind the rock. To his dismay, it had been raided by the squirrel. The last of his terrible troll bread and dried fruit were gone, but all his non-edible things – including his beloved typing wand – remained.

When he'd gathered it together and incorporated his treasure, he turned to find Gnorr picking at a branch of the oak from which Lora had fallen last evening.

“What's up, Gnorr?”

Gnorr let go of the branch, which snapped back to its former place, and showed him the contents of his hands: acorns.

“A present,” he said.

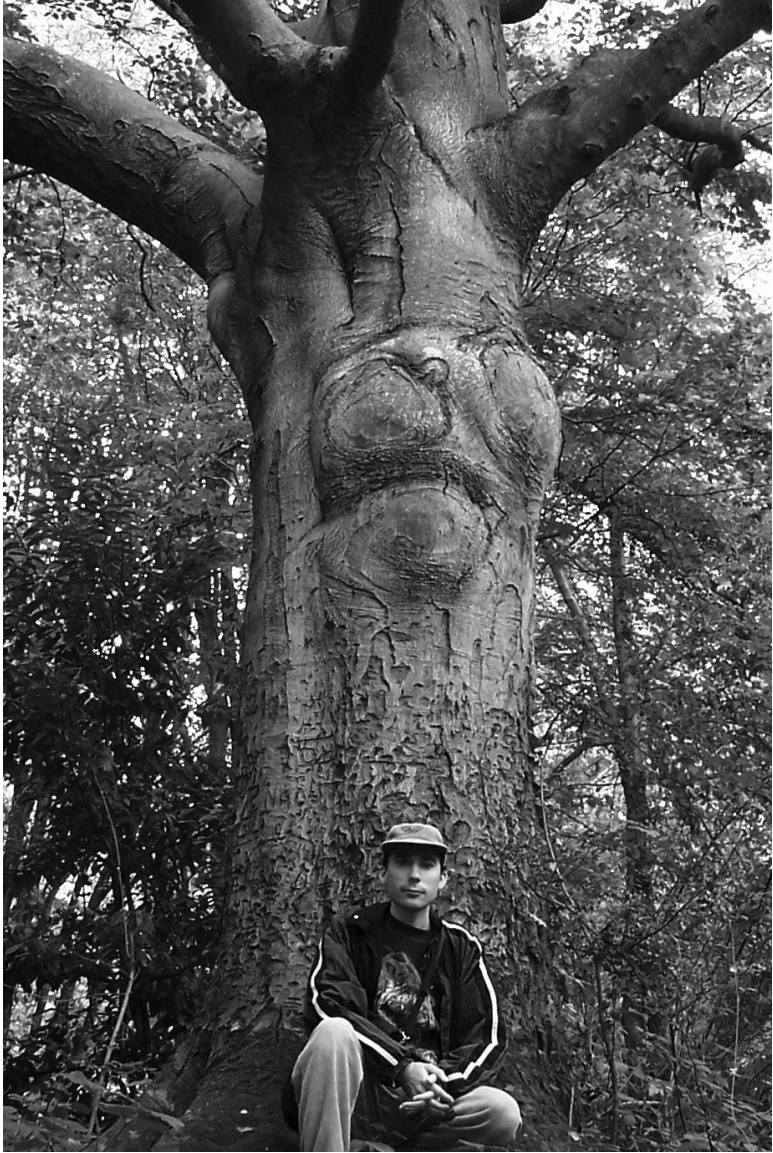
He wandered about from hole to hole with his head cocked to one side. When he found the correct one, he stopped and dumped the entire lot down it. The squirrel squeaked angrily, fought its way to the top of the pile, saw the troll, and quickly disappeared again.

“Hur-hur-hur!” Gnorr chuckled, and they resumed their journey.

The squirrel watched them go, then became more interested in the bounty that had fallen into its lair. It shoved several acorns into its cheeks, and disappeared down the hole to stow them.

An odd little tune like the falling of pebbles graced the night air, lost its way, and another soon followed it. After a bar or two, a high, squeaky whistle joined in, and attempted to keep up.

The End.



[About The Author](#)

Joshua Blanc was born in Australia, and has lived in Canada since 1994. He developed a taste for writing in primary school, and started writing science-fiction in his teens. He now writes speculative fiction with a sense of humour, ranging from fantasy to horror to the just-plain-odd. His first published short was *Death of a Sock Puppet*, in 2001. His work has since appeared in several e-zines. *Tales of Elves and Trolls: The Crystal Goblin* is his first book.

Joshua is also an amateur nature photographer, and produces electronic music as *The Manitou*.

For more of Joshua's work, please visit:

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Forgotten magic stirs...

When Lora, a headstrong elf-child, slips away from the orphanage little does she dream it will lead to a series of grand adventures. Along with Sticky the imp, a slave seeking asylum in the Elven Realm, she journeys into enemy troll territory. Here they meet a troll outlander named Gnorr, whom Lora grows to love as the father she never knew. But convincing the elves of Gnorr's peaceful intentions will not prove easy.

As the three of them strive to make a place for themselves in the quiet elven village of Gwyn-Elm, knowledge of a magical artefact known as The Crystal Goblin comes to light. Its influence over their lives runs deeper than they can imagine, drawing them into a conflict far greater than their personal struggles.

* * *

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