

Troll Bridge

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The air blew off the mountains, filling the air with fine ice crystals. It was too cold to snow. In weather like this wolves came down into villages, trees in the heart of the forest exploded when they froze.

In weather like this right-thinking people were indoors, in front of the fire, telling stories about heroes.

It was an old horse. It was an old rider. The horse looked like a shrink-wrapped toast rack; the man looked as though the only reason he wasn't falling off was because he couldn't muster the energy. Despite the bitterly cold wind, he was wearing nothing but a tiny leather kilt and a dirty bandage on one knee.

He took the soggy remnant of a cigarette out of his mouth and stubbed it out on his hand.

'Right,' he said, 'let's do it.'

'That's all very well for you to say,' said the horse. 'But what if you have one of your dizzy spells? And your back is playing up. How shall I feel, being eaten because your back's played you up at the wrong moment?'

'It'll never happen,' said the man. He lowered himself on to the chilly stones, and blew on his fingers. Then, from the horse's pack, he took a sword with an edge like a badly maintained saw and gave a few half-hearted thrusts at the air.

'Still got the old knackcaroony,' he said. He winced, and leaned against a tree. 'I'll swear this bloody sword gets heavier every day.'

'You ought to pack it in, you know,' said the horse. 'Call it a day. This sort of thing at your time of life. It's not right.'

The man rolled his eyes.

'Blast that damn distress auction. This is what comes of buying something that belonged to a wizard,' he said, to the cold wind in general. 'I looked at your teeth, I looked at you hooves, it never occurred to me to listen.'

'Who did you think was bidding against you?' said the horse.

Cohen the barbarian stayed leaning against the tree. He was not sure that he could pull himself upright again.

'You must have plenty of treasure stashed away,' said the horse. 'We could go Rimwards. How about it? Nice and warm. Get a nice warm place by a beach somewhere, what do you say?'

'No treasure,' said Cohen. 'Spent it all. Drank it all. Gave it all away. Lost it.'

'You should have saved some for your old age.'

'Never thought I'd have an old age.'

'One day you're going to die,' said the horse. 'It might be today.'

'I know. Why do you think I've come here?'

The horse turned and looked towards the gorge. The road here was pitted and cracked. Young trees were pushing up between the stones. The forest crowded in on either side. In a few years no one would know there'd even been a road here. By the look of it, no one knew now.

'You've come here to die?'

'No. But there's something I've always been meaning to do. Ever since I was a lad.'

'Yeah?'

Cohen tried easing himself upright again. Tendons twanged their red-hot messages down his legs..

'My dad,' he squeaked. He got control again. 'My dad,' he said, 'said to me...'

He fought for breath.

'Son,' said the horse, helpfully.

'What?'

'Son,' said the horse. 'No father every calls his boy "son" unless he's about to impart wisdom. Well-

known fact.'

'It's my reminiscence.'

'Sorry'

'He said... Son... yes, OK... Son, when you can face down a troll in single combat, the you can do anything.'

The horse blinked at him. The it turned and looked down, again, through the tree-jostled road to the gloom of the gorge. There was a stone bridge down there.

A horrible feeling stole over it.

Its hooves jiggled nervously on the ruined road.

'Rimwards,' it said. 'Nice and warm.' 'No.'

'What's the good of killing a troll? What've you got when you've killed a troll?'

'A dead troll. That's the point. Anyway, I don't have to kill it. Just defeat it. One on one. Mano a... troll. And if I didn't try my father would turn in his mound.'

'You told me he drove you out of the tribe when you were eleven.'

'Best day's work he ever did. Taught me to stand on other people's feet. Come over here, will you?'

The horse sidled over. Cohen got a grip on the saddle and heaved himself fully upright.

'And you're going to fight a troll today,' said the horse.

Cohen fumbled in the saddlebag and pulled out his tobacco pouch. The wind whipped at the shreds as he rolled another skinny cigarette in the cup of his hands.

'Yeah,' he said.

'And you've come all the way out here to do it.'

'Got to,' said Cohen. 'When did you last see a bridge with a troll under it? There were hundreds of 'em when I was a lad. Now there's more trolls in the cities than there are in the mountains. Fat as butter, most of 'em. What did we fight all those wars for? Now... cross that bridge.'

It was a lonely bridge across a shallow, white, and treacherous river in a deep valley. The sort of place where you got...

A grey shape vaulted over the parapet and landed splay-footed in front of the horse. It waved a club.

'All right,' it growled.

'Oh...' the horse began.

The troll blinked. Even the cold and cloudy winter skies seriously reduced the conductivity of a troll's silicon brain, and it had taken it this long to realize that the saddle was unoccupied.

It blinked again, because it could suddenly feel a knife point resting on the back of its neck.

'Hello,' said a voice by its ear.

The troll swallowed. But very carefully.

'Look,' it said desperately, 'It's tradition, OK? A bridge like this, people are to expect a troll... 'Ere,' it added, as another thought crawled past, 'ow come I never 'eard you creepin' up on me?'

'Because I'm good at it,' said the old man.

'That's right,' said the horse. 'He's crept up on more people than you've had frightened dinners.'

The troll risked a sideways glance.

'Bloody hell,' it whispered. 'You think you're Cohen the Barbarian, do you?'

'What do you think?' said Cohen the Barbarian.

'Listen,' said the horse, 'if he hadn't wrapped sacks round his knees you could have told by the clicking.'

It took the troll some time to work this out.

'Oh wow,' it breathed. 'On my bridge! Wow!'

'What?' said Cohen.

The troll ducked out of his grip and waved its hands frantically. 'It's all right! It's all right!' it shouted, as Cohen advanced. 'You've got me! You've got me! I'm not arguing! I just want to call the family up, all right? Otherwise no one'll ever believe me. Cohen the Barbarian! On my bridge!' Its huge stony chest swelled further. 'My bloody brother-in-law's always swanking about his huge bloody wooden bridge, that's all my wife ever talks about. Hah! I'd like to see the look on his face... oh, no! What can you think of me?'

'Good question,' said Cohen.

The troll dropped its club and seized one of Cohen's hands.

'Mica's the name,' it said. 'You don't know what an honour this is!'

He leaned over the parapet. 'Beryl! Get up here! Bring the kids!'

He turned back to Cohen, his face glowing with happiness and pride.

'Beryl's always sayin' we ought to move out, get something better, but I tell her, this bridge has been in our family for generations, there's always been a troll under Death Bridge. It's tradition.'

A huge female troll carrying two babies shuffled up the bank, followed by a tail of smaller trolls. They lined up behind their father, watching Cohen owlshly.

'This is Beryl,' said the troll. His wife glowered at Cohen. 'And this...' he propelled forward a scowling smaller edition of himself, clutching a junior version of his club - 'is my lad Scree. A real chip off the old block. Going to take on the bridge when I'm gone, ain't you, Scree. Look, lad, this is Cohen the Barbarian! What d'you think o' that, eh? On our bridge! We don't just have rich fat soft ole merchants like your uncle Pyrites gets,' said the troll, still talking to his son but smirking past him to his wife, 'we 'ave proper heroes like they used to in the old days.'

The troll's wife looked Cohen up and down.

'Rich, is he?' she said.

'Rich has nothing to do with it,' said the troll.

'Are you going to kill our dad?' said Scree suspiciously.

'Corse he is,' said Mica severely. 'It's his job. An' then I'll get famed in song an' story. This is Cohen the Barbarian, right, not some bugger from the village with a pitchfork. 'E's a famous hero come all this way to see us, so just you show 'im some respect.

'Sorry about that, sir,' he said to Cohen. 'Kids today. You know how it is.'

The horse started to snigger.

'Now look...' Cohen began.

'I remember my dad tellin' me about you when I was a pebble,' said Mica. 'E bestrides the world like a clossus, he said.'

There was a silence. Cohen wondered what a clossus was, and felt Beryl's stony gaze fixed upon him.

'He's just a little old man,' she said. 'He don't look very heroic to me. If he's so good, why ain't he rich?'

'Now you listen to me...' Mica began.

'This is what we've been waiting for, is it?' said his wife. 'Sitting under a leaky bridge the whole time? Waiting for people that never come? Waiting for little old bandy-legged old men? I should have listened to my mother! You want me to let our son sit under a bridge waiting for some little old man to kill him? That's what being a troll is all about? Well, it ain't happening!'

'Now you just...'

'Hah! Pyrites doesn't get little old men! He gets big fat merchants! He's someone. You should have gone in with him when you had the chance!'

'I'd rather eat worms!'

'Worms? Hah? Since when could we afford to eat worms?'

'Can we have a word?' said Cohen.

He strolled towards the far end of the bridge, swinging his sword from one hand. The troll padded after him.

Cohen fumbled for his tobacco pouch. He looked up at the troll, and held out the bag.

'Smoke?' he said.

'That stuff can kill you,' said the troll.

'Yes. But not today.'

'Don't you hang about talking to your no-good friends!' bellowed Beryl, from her end of the bridge. 'Today's your day for going down to the sawmill! You know Chert said he couldn't go on holding the job open if you weren't taking it seriously.'

Mica gave Cohen a sorrowful little smirk.

'She's very supportive,' he said.

'I'm not climbing all the way down to the river to pull you out again!' Beryl roared. 'You tell him about the billy goats, Mr Big Troll!'

'Billy goats?' said Cohen.

'I don't know anything about billy goats,' said Mica. 'She's always going on about billy goats. I have no knowledge whatsoever about billy goats.' He winced. They watched Beryl usher the young trolls down the bank and into the darkness under the bridge.

'The thing is,' said Cohen, when they were alone, 'I wasn't intending to kill you.'

The troll's face fell.

'You weren't?'

'Just throw you over the bridge and steal whatever treasure you've got.'

'You were?'

Cohen patted him on the back. 'Besides,' he said, 'I like to see people with... good memories. That's what the land needs. Good memories.'

The troll stood to attention.

'I try to do my best sir,' it said. 'My lad wants to go off to work in the city. I've told him, there's bin a troll under this bridge for nigh on five hundred years...'

'So if you just hand over the treasure,' said Cohen, 'I'll be getting along.'

The troll's face creased in sudden panic.

'Treasure? Haven't got any,' it said.

'Oh, come on,' said Cohen. 'Well set-up bridge like this?'

'Yeah, but no one uses this road any more,' said Mica. 'You're the first one along in months, and that's a fact. Beryl says I ought to have gone in with her brother when they built the new road over his bridge, but,' he raised his voice, 'I said, there's been trolls under this bridge...'

'Yeah,' said Cohen.

'The trouble is, the stones keep on falling out,' said the troll. 'And you'd never believe what those masons charge. Bloody dwarfs. You can't trust 'em.' He leaned towards Cohen. 'To tell you the truth, I'm having to work three days a week down at my brother-in-law's lumber mill just to make ends meet.'

'I thought your brother-in-law had a bridge?' said Cohen.

'One of 'em has. But my wife's got brothers like dogs have fleas,' said the troll. He looked gloomily into the torrent. 'One of 'em's a lumber merchant down in Sour Water, one of 'em runs the bridge, and the big fat one is a merchant over on Bitter Pike. Call that a proper job for a troll?'

'One of them's in the bridge business, though,' said Cohen.

'Bridge business? Sitting in a box all day charging people a silver piece to walk across? Half the time he ain't even there! He just pays some dwarf to take the money. And he calls himself a troll! You can't tell him from a human till you're right up close!'

Cohen nodded understandingly.

'D'you know,' said the troll, 'I have to go over and have dinner with them every week? All three of 'em? And listen to 'em go on about moving with the times...'

He turned a big, sad face to Cohen.

'What's wrong with being a troll under a bridge?' he said. 'I was brought up to be a troll under a bridge. I want young Scree to be a troll under a bridge after I'm gone. What's wrong with that? You've got to have trolls under bridges. Otherwise, what's it all about? What's it all for?'

They leaned morosely on the parapet, looking down into the white water.

'You know,' said Cohen slowly, 'I can remember when a man could ride all the way from here to the Blade Mountains and never see another living thing.' He fingered his sword. 'At least not for very long.'

He threw the butt of his cigarette into the water. 'It's all farms now. All little farms, run by little people. And fences everywhere. Everywhere you look, farms and fences and little people.'

'She's right, of course,' said the troll, continuing some interior conversation. 'There's no future in just jumping out from under a bridge.'

'I mean,' said Cohen, 'I've got nothing against farms. Or farmers. You've got to have them. It's just that they used to be a long way off, around the edges. Now this is the edge.'

'Pushed back all the time,' said the troll. 'Changing all the time. Like my brother-in-law Chert. A lumber mill! A troll running a lumber mill! And you should see the mess he's making of Cutshade Forest!'

Cohen looked up, surprised.

'What, the one with the giant spiders in it?'

'Spiders? There ain't no spiders now. Just stumps.'

'Stumps? Stumps? I used to like that forest. It was... well, it was darksome. You don't get proper darksome any more. You really knew what terror was, in a forest like that.'

'You want darksome? He's replanting with spruce,' said Mica.

'Spruce!'

'It's not his idea. He wouldn't know one tree from another. That's all down to Clay. He put him up to it.'

Cohen felt dizzy. 'Who's Clay?'

'I said I'd got three brothers-in-law, right? He's the merchant. So he said replanting would make the land easier to sell.'

There was a long pause while Cohen digested this.

Then he said, 'You can't sell Cutshade Forest. It doesn't belong to anyone.'

'Yeah. He says that's why you can sell it.'

Cohen brought his fist down on the parapet. A piece of stone detached itself and tumbled down into the gorge.

'Sorry,' he said.

'That's all right. Bits fall off all the time, like I said.'

Cohen turned. 'What's happening? I remember all the big old wars. Don't you? You must have fought.'

'I carried a club, yeah.'

'It was supposed to be for a bright new future and law and stuff. That's what people said.'

'Well, I fought because a big troll with a whip told me to,' said Mica, cautiously. 'But I know what you mean.'

'I mean it wasn't for farms and spruce trees. Was it?'

Mica hung his head. 'And here's me with this apology for a bridge. I feel really bad about it,' he said, 'you coming all this way and everything...'

'And there was some king or other,' said Cohen, vaguely, looking at the water. 'And I think there were some wizards. But there was a king. I'm pretty certain there was a king. Never met him. You know?' He grinned at the troll. 'I can't remember his name. Don't think they ever told me his name.'

About half an hour later Cohen's horse emerged from the gloomy woods on to a bleak, windswept moorland. It plodded on for a while before saying, 'All right... how much did you give him?'

'Twelve gold pieces,' said Cohen.

'Why'd you give him twelve gold pieces?'

'I didn't have more than twelve.'

'You must be mad.'

'When I was just starting out in the barbarian hero business,' said Cohen, 'every bridge had a troll under it. And you couldn't go through a forest like we've just gone through without a dozen goblins trying to chop your head off.' He sighed, 'I wonder what happened to 'em all?'

'You,' said the horse.

'Well, yes. But I always thought there'd be some more. I always thought there's be some more edges.'

'How old are you?' said the horse.

'Dunno.'

'Old enough to know better, then.'

'Yeah. Right.' Cohen lit another cigarette and coughed until his eyes watered.

'Gone soft in the head!'

'Yeah.'

'Giving your last dollar to a troll!'

'Yeah.' Cohen wheezed a stream of smoke at the sunset.

'Why?'

Cohen stared at the sky. The red glow was as cold as the slopes of hell. An icy wind blew across the steppes, whipping at what remained of his hair. 'For the sake of the way things should be,' he said.

'Hah!'

'For the sake of things that were.'

'Hah!'

Cohen looked down.

He grinned.

'And for three addresses. One day I'm going to die,' he said, 'but not, I think, today.'

The air blew off the mountains, filling the air with fine ice crystals. It was too cold to snow. In weather like this wolves came down into villages, trees in the heart of the forest exploded when they froze. Except there were fewer and fewer wolves these days, and less and less forest.

In weather like this right-thinking people were indoors, in front of the fire.

Telling stories about heroes.

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