



End of a Line

a fantasy vignette

Three soldiers rode across an old stone bridge, surrounded by verdant grass and forest. Their armor shone in the sun, and their underclothes were dark with sweat. A rough red sash around their waists held a straight sword and dagger, and though their arms and legs were lightly armored, their heads were uncovered. Their horses wore barding of white cloth with red piping, and small saddlebags sat on their haunches. In the lead, on a black charger, was a man with a tan face and short white hair, creased with age but lithe in the saddle. Behind him, on tan horses, rode a young man and woman with sun-kissed skin. His hair was dark and shoulder-length; hers was light and stopped just below the ear.

They had left the bridge and entered the welcoming shade of the forest, only to be assaulted with the stench of piss and decay. The old man, a general by his stripes, stood in his saddle and looked around. On the right was a giant boulder which bore odious stains near the ground. To the left, in the bushes, was a wide campsite with a dead fire pit and logs for benches, though one was missing. Flung about the place were carcasses, bones, and offal. He motioned with his left hand, and the young man rode forward.

"Orsim, what do you think?" he asked quietly. Orsim leaned forward on his saddle horn and thought for a moment.

"A madman," he answered, but then he walked his horse over to the boulder and leaned down, inspecting the pissed sections of the rock. The dark places were scored and pockmarked. He pulled back into his saddle, deep in thought. The general watched him for a moment.

"It's an ogre, isn't it. Or a troll," he said to Orsim.

Orsim opened his eyes and looked around again. "But how? This isn't ogre habitat. And trolls live farther north." He looked through the trees to a mountain range, flat and blue in the distance. The woman rode her horse ahead of the general, beside Orsim.

"We should ride ahead, sir," she said.

"No, Clere, stay with me. It must be a troll. More the merrier when fighting those brutes." He stood in his saddle again and looked for the snow-capped peak, seat of the local dwarven king. "The dwarven expansion must have pushed them from the mountains," he said quietly. "That does not bode well for our kingdom."

Orsim was watching his horse's ears, flicking left and right. "He hears something," he said. Just then came the sound of groaning wood and heavy breath. From their right a dark shape stepped into view for a moment, before a tree trunk swung out and connected with Orsim and Clere, knocking them out of their saddles and into the air, rag dolls flung by an angry child, fully extended and blissfully unconscious.

They landed on the downward slope of a grassy bank, tearing a muddy path before skidding to a stop. Orsim woke up moments later, gasping for breath and trying to clutch his chest through dented armor. Eyes wild, teeth clenched, he searched the top of the hill for a sign of their attacker, even as great,

wheezing breaths shook his frame. Distant roars of anger, neighing horses, and snapping branches filled his ears. He choked and spit out pieces of moldy wood.

Clere had come to a rest only a few feet away, painted in mud and pieces of bark. She was examining her hands, a look of disgust on her face.

"I think the tree... was rotted," Orsim managed to say.

"Stupid trolls!" she snarled. "My hands... my fingers..."

"Are they..." Orsim took a deep breath and coughed. "Are they broken?"

"I took the hit across my arms. Stunned, I think."

A terrifying bellow got their attention, and they struggled to their feet. Suddenly a troll appeared at the edge of bridge: nine feet of flab, sinew, and muscle bulging in scabby green skin. Sighting them below, its jaw flapped open in rage as giant hands struggled to free a large stone. The general's sword was buried to the hilt in its chest.

Wincing with pain, they sprinted underneath the bridge. In the open they were as good as dead, though now they were trapped. Fifteen feet above them, they could hear the troll shuffle back and forth across the bridge. Clere was trying to ball her hands into fists. She couldn't keep them closed.

"We need the spears," she said. "And I can't hold them."

"Okay..." replied Orsim, who was watching for the shadow of the troll.

"And we can't get out unless he's distracted," she continued.

"What?" he snapped. "How in the hell..."

"Listen. Be ready to move. Get to the top of the..." The troll growled and roared at a deafening volume. "Top of the slope, but hide behind the bridge. On my mark, run. I'll cover you."

He stood back for a moment and looked at her, eyes soft. The troll slammed the bridge above them. She sighed and shook her head.

"Go that way," she said, pointing to the right. On that side, the top of the giant boulder was nearly in view. With a nod, he pressed his back against the base of the bridge. Underneath were two pillars that supported its arches. She dashed behind one, leapt over the brook, and dashed behind the other. "Ready?" she called.

"Yeah!" he answered.

Clere stepped out from behind the wide pillar and sighted the troll, who howled in fury and threw a stone. The huge rock hit the ground and dug deep, sending mud flying. Orsim could hear the beast grunting as it tried to tear another small boulder from its ancient seat. He stole up the bank, keeping close to the bridge, and stopped near its surface, out of sight. The troll had gone quiet, and his heart pounded loud in his chest. What was going on?

Then the troll released a breath and blasted howls of anger.

"Yoo-hoo! Hey, ugly!" Clere was shouting. "Can't get that rock free? Try another, you bastard!"

A cry between anguish and hate came from the creature as it pawed the stones. Orsim was pressed into the bridge, face up, eyes wide, watching for sign of the troll. Then came a deep hoot of victory and its feet slapped away.

"Go! Now!" Clere shouted. Orsim bolted for the nearest tree that would provide cover, not daring to waste a look to the side. He knew he might die, and knew any delay would guarantee it. All sound seemed to evaporate as he slipped into the shadows.

He finally got behind the tree, breath coming short and quick.

"Stay hidden!" he heard Clere calling, voice faint with distance. "He's looking around! Hey, ugly! Bastard! Take this!" She hurled something with a loud yell, and the troll snarled with surprised, slapping the bridge over and over with his giant hands again. "Go go go!" she yelled.

He made it to the boulder, then hustled around the other side. The horses stood together, confused and terrified, but they had been trained well. Mere ponies would have bolted long ago. Orsim tried not to look at the body of the general, but could not avoid a glimpse of what had once been a head. Orsim unloaded two spears, then stalked towards the troll, fifty feet distant, just outside the shadows and illuminated by the sun. He stopped ten feet short of his target.

As it pounded the left side of its chest, he hurled a spear at its back. The second was in both hands before the first punctured the troll's right lung. Its howls of rage rattled into pain, and it turned so viciously that the spear flew out of its side.

Teeth clenched, he prepared for the charge. He noted the general's sword sticking in the right side of its chest, and Clere's throwing knife in its right thigh. Orsim shifted his stance.

The troll ran forward at full tilt, jaw closed in a murderous scowl, left fist raising to swing. Orsim had anticipated this, and in one smooth motion pushed the spear through its throat and leapt back, swinging the base of the spear out and planting it into the dirt. Inertia drove the heavy beast deeper into the spear, the low angle tearing a gruesome hole in its neck and propping up its jaw.

Its eyes were wide in shock as blood poured out. For a moment, Orsim saw a very human look of pain and sadness, before its meaty paw crushed into his side and flung him off the path. The spear bowed under the weight, then snapped. Clere had already run up the bank, sword in hand. As the troll pushed itself up, she cleaved its neck in a two-handed stroke. The sword loosed itself from her hands as the giant green monster slumped to the ground, lifeless, blood boiling out and drenching the soil.

Orsim saw this from the ground as he caught his breath. Everything hurt, but he could not rest now. With a grunt of exertion, he sat up and swept his hair out his eyes with a bloody hand. Clere was standing over the corpse. Light and shadow played over her body, and her eyes were staring into space. Orsim committed the image to memory before standing with another groan.

Together, they walked to the body of their general. He had suffered a single, terrible blow to the head. Covering the mess with a black shirt, they straightened his body and carefully removed his badges of office.

By nightfall, a double funeral pyre blazed in a clearing: the troll beneath, the general above. His sword, carefully washed by Orsim, had been presented to Clere, who carried it on her belt with quiet pride. Around his neck hung the general's signet ring. Beyond their sight, a chorus of insects chirped and creaked. Beyond the forest, weeds gained ground in ruined cities. And farther still, at the very edge of the horizon, a new crown waited for a king who would never arrive.