

BQG

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For trolls everywhere

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STONE

Bog smelled the humans from across the lake. The stench floated high on the breeze, infecting the stars themselves, and then settled among the branches of the birch trees. What were humans doing in their hunting grounds?

Wrinkling his nose, Bog trailed his father, Jeddal, through the undergrowth. Jeddal twitched his tail, jerking its feathery plume from side to side. Bog flicked his own blunt tail, too.

Silent as stone, they increased the distance between them and the source of the smell. Not a twig cracked under their bare feet. Not a leaf fluttered as they passed. The darkness cloaked them, and their night vision shielded them from a surprise attack by bumbling humans.

"Never hunt a human, Bog." Jeddal's growl was barely audible.

Bog nodded at the familiar lesson. "They're not even good enough for the stewpot," he whispered.

They trekked through the forest under the canopy of stars that winked off and on through the trees. When a flying squirrel glided onto a nearby branch, Bog crouched, ready to spring. He could already smell roasted squirrel turning on a spit.

"Leave it." Jeddal grunted. "They're still too close."

Bog's stomach grumbled, but he obeyed.

They walked until the moon rose above the treetops. It was half-full, gleaming silver against a deep purple sky.

"Why are they here?" Bog asked once they were far from the weak human ears. "I thought they slept at night."

Jeddal scowled. "Who knows?" He led Bog toward a colossal rock formation—Ymir's bones rising out of the earth. In a darkened hollow on its eastern side, Jeddal stopped, lowering his rucksack. "Humans aren't very smart, so much of what they do doesn't make sense." He pulled out a jug of broth, uncorked it, and hoisted it to his lips.

Even in the shadows, Jeddal's grey pelt was magnificent, his prodigious nose impressive. Bog glanced down at his own leathery hide that showed through his patchy grey fur. With a blunt nose and no fur on his face, hands, and feet, he wasn't much of a troll, although he tried to be a good son.

Jeddal passed the jug to Bog. "I used to believe trolls and humans could live in peace, even after a human killed my father. But no more."

Jeddal had never talked about peace before.

"What happened?"

"I trusted a human. One foolish time." Jeddal's eyes became unfocused, as if he were recalling some distant memory from the black undergrowth of his mind.

"Which human?" Bog prodded for more.

Jeddal waved his question away. "Once they get your scent, humans will hound you."

"Because they only cause trouble?" Bog took a swig and then recorked the jug. The broth was cold, a tasty leftover from the night's breakfast with Kasha and the youngsters.

"That's right," Jeddal muttered. "They'll kill for revenge. Or even for sport. I once saw some humans kill a moose and then take the head for a trophy."

Bog licked his lips. "What did they do with all that meat?"

"They left it." Jeddal took the jug from him.

"But why—"

"Enough questions." Jeddal shoved the jug into his rucksack. "We've hunting to do. The youngsters can't feed themselves."

A twig snapped in the distance, beyond the rock formation. The human stench invaded once again, drifting from the abandoned deer track he and Jeddal had just trekked.

"Are *they* hunting us?" Bog whispered.

Jeddal wiggled his ears, listening intently. "If these humans want a trail to follow, we'll give them one." He headed away from the cave where Kasha and the youngsters would be going about their chores, unsuspecting.

"Break branches, Bog. Step heavy. Make it easy for them to track us," Jeddal ordered, not bothering to lower his voice. "It's going to be a long walk for those humans."

For us, too, thought Bog, but he said nothing.



The reek and noise of the humans trailed them endlessly as Jeddal led them northwest, farther and farther from the family cave.

Halfway through the night, when Bog's legs demanded a rest, he asked, "Why not fight the humans, Father? I only scent two—we could be done with them quickly. Then we could hunt a juicy, plump raccoon or a—"

"We'd have more humans after us by next nightfall." Jeddal's tail whipped the nearby branches. "And then what would we do—fight them all? No, a cunning troll lives to see the moon rise."

Bog plodded after Jeddal, stomping a path for the stupid humans to find. Of course, his father was right. If only the humans didn't alert the squirrels

and other prey wherever they went. Ridding their forest of humans was hungry work.

Jeddal's trail ended at a distant swamp, teeming with mosquitoes to sting the humans' feeble hide and thick with mud to ensnare their feet. Once they lost the humans in the worst of the ooze, Bog and Jeddal headed back, quiet as starlight, hiding their trail by wading through a shallow stream.

It was a clever plan, even if it was tiring.

By the time the darkness faded and the sun threatened to rise above the treetops, only six deer mice swung by their tails from Bog's fist, with nothing else in his rucksack.

Bog hurried after Jeddal, slipping through the shadows that still clung to the rocks and clumped under the thick fir trees. The early morning glow of the sky stung his eyes.

"Odin's curse," he said, hating the sun's power, its ability to turn them to stone.

They scurried across a clearing littered with fist-sized rocks, crouching boulders, and low bushes of juniper and blueberry. Almost to the family cave. Kasha and the youngsters would be anxious for their safe arrival.

The humans' scent still wafted on the breeze from behind; they must have passed this way earlier in the night—only about a thousand paces from the cave. Dangerously close.

Bog squinted against the growing light, just as a thin old man and a fat shorter one emerged from a

stand of scrawny cedars. He snarled, dropping the night's catch in a lifeless heap, but Jeddal cowered, kicking a sideways warning at him. *Never let humans know how smart you are.* Bog let his jaw hang open, eyes glaze over, and spit drool over his lip.

"Don't hurt us," Jeddal pleaded in the human tongue, his voice thick and slow, his tail drooping. Jeddal was a head taller than the thin man, who was a head taller than Bog.

"What did I tell you?" the fat man said. "As big as a boulder, as dumb as a cow." He aimed a rock at Bog—too far to the left.

Bog slid sideways so the misfired rock hit his chest. "Ooof." He dropped one shoulder in mock pain.

The humans sniggered.

Bog caught the scent of a third human. A scrawny young thing—barely a man—had sneaked toward the clearing through a hollow rich with ferns. Bog kept a wary eye on him, even though he was too puny to do much damage.

"Please, spare us," Jeddal begged as he edged closer to a boulder the size of a beaver—a good choice for throwing. "We have great riches and magic. Gold, silver, and a pot that never empties of hearty stew."

As if they had such a pot. Bog remembered to hunch, low and weak, keeping one eye on Jeddal. They'd have to fight now—no time for trickery before sunrise.

"Don't try to fool me, you no-soul. I haven't chased you all night just to get your baubles or your pot."

The thin man strutted between Jeddal and the boulder, oblivious to his upcoming fate.

The fat man hurled another rock. This time it hit Jeddal, who whimpered, even though he had a thick hide that not even a human's gunshot could pierce.

"I can't trick you, wise human." Jeddal bowed his head, exposing the back of his furry neck.

Although his knees wanted to buckle, Bog stayed crouched, silently urging the thin man to stop blocking Jeddal's way to the boulder.

"Tell us where your cave is and we'll let you go." The thin man swatted the mosquitoes that easily penetrated his flesh. All three humans were covered in cloth, as if their fur and hide weren't enough.

"Why do you want my cave?" Jeddal glanced up, his eyebrows crumpled together like he didn't understand.

The fat man held up another rock. Bog whimpered and hunched his shoulders as he checked that the puny human hadn't moved.

"I said, tell us where it is," the thin man demanded, finally pacing closer to Bog, leaving the boulder exposed. "Are you hiding others? Where are the rest of the trolls, you useless, stupid creatures?"

Bog let a growl escape. Long before humans existed, trolls had sprouted from the feet of the mighty frost giant Ymir. Trolls would rule the mountains, lakes, and forests long after humans were gone.

"Please, no more rocks. I'll show you to my cave."

Jeddal went down on one knee, close enough to reach the boulder now, his knuckles scraping the ground.

The thin man smiled at Jeddal's furry back. The sun painted the topmost branches gold.

Throw it now, Father, Bog pleaded. Before the sun turned them both to stone.

In one swift motion, Jeddal gripped the boulder and rose to his full height, his roar echoing off the rocks in the clearing.

The thin man backed away—a scrawny wolf with flattened ears. Bog grinned. Finally, the man understood who was in charge.

"Turn on the music," the thin man yelled toward the puny one. "Now."

The puny one leapt from the hollow of ferns, gripping a flat, palm-sized box that glowed with silver light. With trembling fingers, he fiddled with the box.

Jeddal threw the boulder. Bog headed for the puny one, ready to knock him sideways, as a painful clamour burst from the box. A piercing noise ricocheted off the rocks and sliced into his ears.

"No!" He wound one arm over his head to protect his ears. With his other arm, Bog felt for loose rocks, boulders, bushes. He flung whatever he touched at the stabbing noise box.

"Stop!" he screamed.

The blare was endless. Bog's ears were ready to split open. Finally, it stopped as abruptly as it had

begun. He uncovered his ears and shook his still-ringing head.

Jeddal must have been throwing, too. Rocks were strewn across the clearing, clumps of blueberries uprooted, prickly junipers scattered. A huge boulder cast a shadow over Bog, blocking his view of Jeddal. Sunlight beamed from the east, beyond the boulder, and his eyes burned as the world brightened.

The noise box was smashed. The humans had fled to the scrawny cedars about ten paces away—the thin man bleeding from his forehead. Bog smirked. Soon, they'd be running home, squealing.

The sun grew brighter, more dangerous. Even in the shadow of the boulder, Bog narrowed his eyes against its glare. He shadow-slipped backward, careful to avoid the sun's deadly rays. He peered around for Jeddal.

Jeddal wasn't there. Bog shadow-slipped forward.

The humans were advancing out of the trees, smiling, showing horrible flat teeth. Bog growled, stirring the air with his tail, yet they kept advancing. Why wasn't Jeddal howling at these humans?

Bog reached out to touch the boulder and then snatched his hand back in horror. He choked in a breath, gaping at the massive rock. Rounded ears, rugged cheeks, glorious warty nose. Jeddal? Lured into the sun and turned to stone?

"Father!" Bog wailed. How had the humans outwitted them?

A laugh rang out.

“The Troll Hunter was right. They are scared of music.” It was the fat human’s whining voice.

The vermin crept closer, fists raised.

“Where’s your nest, troll?” The thin man smirked.
“Where are the others?”

Bog growled. *Never hunt a human*, Jeddal had said.
But they could hunt him and his family?

He crouched low and swung out with all his might, staying within Jeddal’s shadow. He gripped the pulp of the fat man’s forearm, dragged him into the shadows, and smacked a fist into the soft flesh of his gut. When the others ran at Bog, he tossed the fat man onto them. He punched and flailed until the humans fled into the sunlight, where Bog couldn’t follow.

The thin man scurried to the centre of the clearing, his breath rasping and his nostrils flaring. The puny man tried to support the fat one, who was doubled over clutching his stomach.

“Cowards!” Bog yelled from the safety of Jeddal’s shadow. “Finish the fight.”

Silence hung between them. A finch and two cardinals dared to sing. A she-wolf called to her cubs.

The humans turned tail and ran south, darting between tiny patches of sun.

Bog roared until the forest was mute. Until only the rustle of the birches could be heard. Then he sank against the boulder that was now his father. He pressed his face against the cold stone. He let tears drip hopeful magic onto the rock.

The shadows shrank. The sun demanded its due. Bog collected the deer mice and followed Jeddal’s shadow to the shade of the forest canopy.

His head hung heavy. His nose drooped. He headed home, doubling back repeatedly to mask his trail before hurrying through the shadows. Alone.