

# The Troll and the Lime Tree

By Nate Kailhofer

Dowers sniggered at the three knights crouching in the bushes just past the north edge of his stone bridge. Hee-Hee! He could smell an opportunity for some fun further away than his poor lime tree. That, and he could hear their plans.

Sir Nit whispered, "We wait him out. The troll will look the other way, and we will surprise him. We'll best him with numbers."

Sir Unwi replied, "As you say."

Sir Sany grumbled, "Three will do no good. We should come back with more men."

Nit said, "Three knights is more than enough."

Unwi echoed, "More than enough."

"A troll is twice our size, moves like the wind, and is stronger than ten knights. And they're cruel."

Nit scolded, "You fight under my banner, and we're taking this bridge. A knight doesn't run from battle!"

Unwi added, "No running."

Sany held his tongue.

Finally. Time to begin! Dowers stretched and put his chin to his chest. Let them think I've fallen asleep.

Nit said, "Look! He sleeps! Stand ready."

Unwi said, "Ready!"

Sany grumbled, "It's a trick. We should withdraw."

"Now!" Nit shouted. "Have at him!"

Nit's armor pounded across the stone bridge, Unwi's close behind. Sany's sounded with much less enthusiasm.

Nit leapt off the bridge, straight for Dowers. Without so much as a look, Dowers punched the charging knight in the chest, propelling him back like a shot into the side of the bridge. Dowers was especially proud of the sound Nit's bones made when they struck the stone.

So satisfying!

Unwi bellowed his (effect) war cry and leapt off the bridge toward Dowers, too. Dowers dodged to the side, letting Unwi land flat-faced on the ground. Dowers placed a foot on his back, pinning him down.

Unwi struggled, unable to breathe with the troll's weight on him.

Dowers gestured to Sany on the bridge. "Come on, to me! Slay me, knight! I am your enemy!"

Sany stared at him. "The creek is not deeper than my knees. I need not use your bridge."

Sany ran.

Dowers frowned. Knights have to fight.

Dowers crushed Unwi's skull and dashed after Sany. In no time, Dowers tackled him. Sany was no match for Dower's strength.

Pulling Sany's limbs from his torso, Dowers grumbled, "Running from a fight. Shameless!"

Dowers walked back to his bridge and dropped the pieces of Sany around the base of a tree that grew near the stream's edge. It was a stunted, misshapen thing, its branches sparsely strewn with half-blackened, rotting fruit. Dowers looked at it and sniffled.

"My sweet Persian lime," he told it, "why will you not grow tall? Why does your fruit wither and stay bitter rather than ripen with delicious sour? Why? Need you more fertilizer?"

Dowers dragged Nit's body over and tore it to bits, carefully spreading it amongst the many other bones at the tree's base. He caressed the trunk with love. "Grow of him, my lovely." His meat would be bruised anyway.

Dowers smiled at Unwi's body. "This is the one for roasting!"

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Gnawing on a meaty thigh, Dowers was surprised by the soft sound of leather on stone. Looking up to the bridge, he saw a tall human dressed in dull, ill-fitting clothes.

Ugh! A peasant! He carried something in a sack over his shoulder.

Dowers' guttural growl froze the man in place.

"Merciful heavens!" the man shouted. "A troll!"

The man dropped his sack and ran. Dowers started to pursue him, but stopped short. He could smell something. Something familiar. Something he couldn't quite place. He sniffed toward the sack. The smell was definitely coming from there.

With a claw, he slit the sack. A green fruit rolled out onto the surface of the bridge.

A lime! A good, fresh lime! I haven't smelled one in so long! Dowers dove on it, gobbling it up. He paused for a moment in exquisite ecstasy, quivering with the joy of it. Imagine! A whole bag of limes!

He looked down at his own shrunken tree and paused. Guilt filled him inside. "My lovely, I have forsaken you. I am not worthy of you."

Without so much as looking inside, he tossed the sack onto the fire. Barely a moment later, flames roared up, burning the fabric. In the inferno, he saw more fruit sizzling, a pair of garden tools, and a small seedling. Its roots were tied into a small fabric ball, which burned fast.

"A lime tree!" Dowers dove upon the fire, snatching out the scorched sapling. He doused it in the creek.

No leaf remained. The thin trunk snapped in his hands. A pitiful tangle of muddy roots hung below. It looks sad, as if it will never know joy.

"That man!" Dowers realized. "He must grow limes!"

Dowers set the tree down carefully, and set off after the gardener.

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Dowers tied a strip of the gardener's shirt around the broken pieces of the blackened trunk. Carefully, he pushed earth around the new tree's base, gently tapping the ground flat. He set the man's head in front of his new prize.

"See, my lovelies, all you needed was a gardener to help you grow. Now, you may bear your fruit."

As if in response, a single rotten lime fell from the older tree.

"No," Dowers moaned. "Be you good now. You have a companion. You need not be lonely. The roots were safe in earth and did not burn. The gardener will see to her needs, just as my gift of knights will for you. You may thrive. You may grow."

The blackened, broken trunk of the new lime tipped over.

Dowers frowned. Perhaps it needs a knight instead of a peasant, and then it will be happy. Then it will grow.

Dowers sat on a stump to wait for another victim to try and cross his bridge, no matter how long it took.

I love my trees. I keep them well.

The End

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