

Looks can be deceiving when dealing with trolls, but not with Gronka, his unpleasant looks were as miserable as he was. Then there's the fact he was also sadistic, obsessive and predatory, but most Trolls were.

# Trolls

A Tall Green Tale

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**T**he forest was enormous, dark, yet flourishing as if destined to eat the life from the helpless earth it held captive in its roots absent any remorse. Its canopy was dominated by ... well trees. Who cares what they are called thought Gronka. The troll despised the puny, thought ridden humans for their habit of naming everything. How can you enjoy the eerie gloom of the trees when your busy naming it? The shadow covered moist ground allowed villainous mushrooms to sprout in the fertile bottom layer below, feasting on death and decay. It was a sight and smell Gronka could appreciate all day.

Twisted, choking vines embraced most of the trees in a delightful dance of death. A medley of murky leaves, which grew thick and tangled, added malevolent elements to the otherwise less somber landscape. The eternal question. Who would win? The naked power of the towering trees, robbing the vines of sunlight until they starved? Or the slow choking anaconda-like creepers relentlessly crushing the life from their trunks? I loathe the sun, Gronka thought. How can anyone see with that stupid bright white light blasting in your face? It obscured everything in its blinding white fog. Shadows add such a delicious mystery to everything, but the sun always drives away the beautiful gloom of the shadows, the integrated play of the dark shapes which frolicked like a symphony under the covering leaves of the forest.

The sun hated colors, basting them away in an explosion of white. Light exposed everything! In the dark, there was a constant hidden menace. Gronka reveled in the lingering concealed threats of the darkness. In the light, everything lives. But in the dark ... in the dark ... Gronka was master. Each day he lived was an expression of his mastery and power over dark forces eager to kill him.

Monsters, Gronka thought. Humans are such puss-filled monsters. Cutting down the trees to build their senseless houses Before the dance of death between tree and vine could be decided. What good is a house? To be safe? Gronka never wanted to be safe. He wanted to experience the raw power of overcoming danger, the majestic might of survival. He loathed the human desire to be safe. In Gronka's nightmares, he was trapped in a burning house, surrounded by the horrid flames slowly, inexorably, closing in, leaving him no room ... no room. No, he thought, the freedom of open darkness was best. The raw power of his personal endurance through force, the true goal of existence.

Looks can be deceiving when dealing with trolls, but not with Gronka, his unpleasant looks were as miserable as he was. Then there's the fact he was also sadistic, obsessive and predatory, but most Trolls were.

Gronka was the largest and certainly the ugliest of the trolls he sat with. His skin was a mottled mixture of black and sickly green, flaking off on hard coal-black scales where the skin grew old and frail. Troll skin doesn't stretch like most living tissue. It fell off, revealing an even thicker, more armored hide, beneath it. Because Gronka was the largest, his rotting skin was the most extensive. Yombi was next. He was a bit more olive green. More common among the younger trolls but still as noble. When his skin flaked it was brown, not the glorious jet black of Gronka's decaying flesh. But still, Gronka was honored to be a troll-like Yombi. Gronka knew he wasn't better than the other trolls, he was simply the biggest, so it fell on him to lead. All trolls united. No troll greater than any other. Such was the mantra. He didn't want to lead because he was better than the others, it was his fate for being the biggest and the oldest. He was determined, however, to be the best leader possible.

Gronka was sure Yombi would succeed him ... if he kept his place. He was strong and resilient and like Gronka, loved exposing himself to the dangers of those which lurked in the forest. Sollix was almost as tall as Yombi but older and more muscular. He was stout because he was not quite as tall and his skin flaked a darker brown than Yombi. He differed from Yombi only because he had tall pointy ears, were Yombi was a member of the short ear clan. Gronka too had tall pointed ears and he favored those of his clan which all had the same lobes. But, unlike the humans, who showed vile hate for those who looked different than they did, Gronka didn't hate Yombi for being a short ear, he didn't personally find them appealing. But he also preferred troll women with two breasts and not the more popular three. Everyone has his preferences. You shouldn't punish those who look different, because they are diverse. Nature punishes far more than troll-kind. Nature punishes with death ... beyond that, Gronka knew, his private opinions carried no weight.

That's not to say he trusted Sollix ... he didn't. Sollix was comfortable in caves. There was something wrong with such behavior and Gronka knew it. How can you feel comfortable in such an enclosed space? No room to swing your club, no room at all. He imagined Sollix would find his end trapped in a cave. Such would be his punishment for being comfortable in an enclosed space. Everyone agreed. That's another reason why Gronka led ... plus the fact, if you didn't like it, Gronka would kill you. He was, after all, the biggest. Everyone had the right to rise in the clan and Gronka had the right to keep you in your place ... if it wasn't your time. Gronka knew someday it would be Yombi's turn and the idea filled him with pride.

Zulbuljan was the smallest one and got the smallest portions, because of his size. Like Yombi, Zulbuljan was a short ear, but his feet were enormous. When he was fully grown he would be taller than Gronka. But it would not be for many years, probably long after Gronka had changed to dust. Zulbuljan's dead skin crusts were also a dark grey ... almost black when they fell off his body. Gronka appreciated that. Zulbuljan also did not say much and Gronka appreciated his quiet even more.

Vuzashi was their female companion. Her skin was a darker, shaded color, almost a jade, her crusts a deep verdant green. She was stalwart long ear who could outrun them all. Gronka was delighted at her speed. A true feat for a troll. Most could manage no more than solid lumber. Her features were soft with a nose much too small for a troll as far as Gronka was concerned. It reminded him of humans and such reminders were not good. But any troll is a troll and, therefore, good.

Five trolls. Each distinctive, each different looking, but in the end, there were all trolls. What was important? Not that one's ears were more pointed or one's skin a greener hue. Except for size. Everyone knew size mattered. But such wasn't trollish, it was nature. Does the elephant not squash the ant when it steps on it? No, size definitely mattered.

The five were busy roasting a group of cattle they had rescued from a nearby human farm over a raging fire. Pasty humans with their stupidly different-colored hair ... keeping cattle as slaves to be led to the slaughter. All animals should be free! Free to be predators or prey. Free to be judged by the perils of the universe, to overcome and prevail where they could, not to be kept captive with nothing to do but to await the end of their existence. All creatures have rights. Rights screamed Gronka's conscience! Creature rights! Stinking humans always believe they are better than everyone else. Human smell, it made Gronka sick to be reminded of their filthy odor. Perhaps they smelled bad because they even though some of their own kind were better than others. Ridiculous. The crimes of men were many fold,

but Gronka thought this behavior was the most vile. He had roasted one or two men just as he did their cattle this evening for such a crime. He counted it justice.

Can you believe men kill their prey before eating them? How grotesque. The cries and struggles of cooking prey and the squirming of your meal in your teeth are the melody and artistry of the creation. The soft dulcet tones of oblivion, the final struggled dance of blessed resistance to one's fate. Although Gronka did admit humans tended to talk too much when you cooked them. Yet men so rarely ate each other, the racist pigs. Ok, his last remark was disingenuous, Gronka knew. Trolls never eat each other. But let's be consistent, shall we? You either do or you don't. If trolls did eat each other, they'd be going at it day and night, not occasionally, if the mood suited them. Trolls knew what trolls know, they weren't squeamish, petty and indecisive like men, unable to stick to a single path. Unable to dream of the universe and their place in it. Always wanting someone else's place.

Dreaming is what is important. The dream of the universe. Your dream of where you belong in the vast cosmos. No troll had the right to stand in the way of another troll's dreaming. You must ... *you must* ... become what you dream, at least when the time is right. Such was as sacred to trolls as breathing. When a troll stops dreaming, he dies. Gronka noted his thinking about dreams had almost allowed his cow to expire from the heat, time to eat it while it was still alive. It screamed as his teeth sank deeply into its flank. It struggled and kicked. Sollix was eating his too, but it stopped squirming after the first bite.

"Sollix," Gronka said in a concerned parental tone, "Slow down, take your time with your food. If you eat it too quickly it will give you indigestion."

Sollix grunted and the bovine's crimson gore ran down his cracked lips and over the open sores on his chin. "At least I'm not as bad as Zulbuljan. Just look at him, he's overcooked his meal and caused it to expire."

Sollix looked at Zulbuljan derisively and spat, "human."

Zulbuljan jumped up impulsively, a club in hand, infuriated at the rabid insult.

Gronka interceded at once, "Sollix, apologize at once," Gronka commanded, "There no cause for that kind of language here. Have you no respect? A racial slur of all things."

Sollix looked honestly dejected.

"You're right," he lamented, "Zulbuljan, I'm truly sorry, that was most uncalled for." He held out what was left of his cow. "Here," he said, "Have mine."

Zulbuljan put his club down and sat, waving away Sollix's respectful offer. But after which he simply toyed with his food, as if the offense had made him lose his appetite.

"Vuzashi wants to wash our clothes," Yombi interjected, trying to turn the conversation in another direction.

"What?" Gronka shouted as if it was a violation of some rule. It wasn't, of course, but it felt like it was. He smiled proudly at Yombi. It was good leadership skills to calm the bad feelings between his brother trolls. Gronka was pleased.

“Uck,” spat Zulbuljan disgusted, “How will I tell which skins belong to me if I can’t smell my scent on them?” He asked dumbfounded.

“I agree,” bellowed Sollix, “Just shake the lice out.”

“Just be sure to do it downwind from me,” Gronka grunted. Everyone laughed, except for Vuzashi. She merely leaned over and bit into the neck of Sollix’s cow, crushing it until the creature stopped moving. Sollix broke into a hearty laugh, followed by the rest of the assemblage.

“The council wants us to move farther away from the humans,” Vuzashi grunted.

“I disagree,” Sollix bellowed, “trolls do not run from danger, we embrace it!” he said proudly.

“It is our right to disagree,” Gronka remarked, “let no one who opposes the view of the council be silent I say. Let your voice be heard. Let no troll quiet another.”

“Here. Here.” The trolls roared as they beat their clubs on the ground with a mighty thunder.

“Yet in the end, we must do what the big ones say. They are older than us, more experienced. But where should we go?” asked Yombi, “Where is there where one cannot smell the reeking odor of men?” A leg of his cow fell off into the fire, spreading a cloud of sparks and ash into the night air, but the others took no notice.

“To the high, snowcapped mountains perhaps,” speculated Vuzashi. “Human’s do not like the cold.”

“I have no trouble with the cold,” Sollix barked, “but there is not enough game in the high mountains to feed us. No, if the humans want a fight, let us give it to them. Even though they are crunchy and their hair gets caught between my teeth.”

“Here. Here.” The trolls roared.

The cattle’s supposed “owners” came crashing to the dell. If Gronka could have counted, he would have counted in the hundreds. Armored men mounted on horses as if the whole region had ridden forth to stop the troll’s righteous efforts to free the bovine slaves of the humans. Still, Gronka was saddened. More of them would have been a better challenge. Yet some of the men carried those little bows. The big ones were nothing, they bounce off your hide, but those little ones ... damn, Gronka remembered, they hurt.

Many carried burning torches, their eyes being so weak, they couldn’t see in a wonderous dark night of the forest, despite the moon’s brilliant glow. Weak things grow in the sunlight Gronka thought, weak and terrible things.

“Ho, varlets,” one of the men announced. Gronka smiled, the smallest men always seemed to go for the biggest, most showy display of vanity, “Stand forth and prepare to meet thy doom.”

“Who takes like that?” Sollix asked rhetorically.

The boring little man on the horse went on about the fleecing of cattle.

“Stealing ...” bellowed Yombi, “you call us thieves ... you ... you ... slavers.” He almost called them humans. But he was too polite to cast such aspersions.

“By thunder,” the slight one said, “not only did you purloin them, but we have caught you eating your ill-gotten gains.”

“These?” cried Gronka, throwing his cow in the fire and picking up his iron spiked club, “They offered themselves to us freely in exchange for us freeing the rest of them from your vile slavery! The rest run free human ... they run free and may the cosmos curse you for your obscene slavery of them!”

Although he was loath to begin a fight, Gronka’s anger got the better of him. He swung his club and knocked several off their horses. One crashed against a tree with a sickening thud, his entrails squeezed out of his armor like a wet fish from a man’s clinging grasp. As the shiny metal collapsed, it crushed its owner to a paste-like pulp.

The humans charged them with long, straight lances. This was a puzzle to the trolls. A troll club was imbedded with iron spikes, the size of daggers, each bent and warped with abandon. A troll thought of a strait weapon as the mark of an untested warrior. Each of the bends and dents on a troll spike represented a hard blow, both delivered and received. It was not uncommon for a young troll to bash his club spike against rocks when it was first made ... to make it look well used. This, but the way, was about as deceitful as a troll could get. Yet the humans used these straight weapons to withering effect.

Although at least a dozen long lances broke against Zulbuljan’s thick hide, a dozen more drove home. He fell, crushing several as he died, his life’s blood spirting from the organ which pumped the blood through his dark green hide. It rose like a fountain of red in the dim moonlight. An elegant and brave end to an honorable troll. A monument to make the stars weep.

Vuzashi fell next. Humans have no honor. They treated her with disdain. None gave her the honor of approaching her directly but showered her with arrows. She bellowed in response, the rushing air from her lungs fell many from their horses ... she rushed them. As she caught up to them she crushed one after another under her wild blows. But men are feckless. One used his lance to cause her to trip. A troll would let his opponent rise, but they set upon her like a locust, each one driving a lance into her back, pinning her to the ground. They struck and struck again until her movement ceased. It was as sad an end as the young Zulbuljan’s was honorable.

Sollix drove into them, seeking revenge. Gronka called him back, they must stand together he proclaimed, but the rage in Sollix’s heart blocked his hearing. He drove forward, but this is what the men wanted. For each one he crushed under his maddened club, a lance pierced his sore-ridden hide. Puss and blood, leaked from his wounds like a fabulous waterfall of color. The very hues of a troll’s life essence. Weakened, he slumped against a tree, slowly sliding to the stickily black ground, surrounded by the bodies of more than twenty times his number.

He swung his club from his seated position, scattering his attackers and keeping his foes at bay. Sollix vomited a pure black sludge, spraying the nearby undergrowth. The color of his eyes abruptly changed from the darkest night to the evil white hell of sunlight. His eyes had been such a magnificent shade of black, so dark you could see the stars reflected in them. Now his white eyes stared into nothing as his lifeless arm let his club crash to the ground uselessly. His skin turned a sickly pale green, his fires extinguished forever. The fire of a brave troll.

Gronka and Yombi stood close together, valiantly driving back the foul humans. But the creatures pressed on and the two trolls were forced to give ground. The landscape was littered with their attacker's corpses, most crushed in their own metal protection. Gronka couldn't understand why they didn't grow their own armor. His reinforced hide was much more resilient and would not crush him as the human's inflexible steel casings did. In the distance was the dim dissonance of noises, predominantly those of prowling animals, it seemed as they were cheering the trolls, recognizing each victory. Applauding each man death. Several wolves gathered, and howling their approval, dragged off some of the weaker humans into the dark night, a gift from their troll allies. Their moans of terror pleased Gronka.

The ruined bodies of armored men made an extended, gruesome trail from the site of the troll's dinner to where the two stood now; winding their blood-soaked way through the wilderness like a sodden snake.

Yet as they fell back, one sound increased to a crescendo, the sounds of fish splashing in a nearby lake. Glancing back it was obvious their combat space running out. Behind them was a high cliff overhanging the cold, icy waters. This was Gronka's nightmare, he was boxed in and out of the room. His universe shrank to a terrifyingly small space, between the pointy sticks of dirty, diminutive men and the open-air high above a forest lake. Gronka had run out of room to swing he beloved club. He roared, dashing both men and horses before him defiantly. Unexpectedly, Yombi leaned forward. His horrible white eyes showed this was the end for him, but he had so many lances embedded deeply in his green trunk they would not permit him the courtesy of becoming one with the earth. Yombi hung dangling at the end of a bristles worth of pikes, unnaturally freezing him between the posture of life and death.

As he observed this sad sight, Gronka failed to pay enough attention to a nasty steel-clad man who plunged his lance into his abdomen. Howling, he swung wildly across his front. Gronka foolishly pushed the lance aside with his gore covered club and in the process allowed the lance's blade to open his second gut. The stones he had swallowed to aid his digestion spilled out lazily on the darkened ground. The sight saddened him. He'd spent years carefully collecting them. The brighter ones had even come from the locked box of a flamboyant, silk dressed human. They glowed red, blue and green in the moon's tender light with many smaller, clear sparkly ones, shining brilliantly, warmly coated in his digestive enzymes.

The men stepped back and stared at the gleaming gemstones in wide-eyed lust.

This gave Gronka the time he so desperately needed. The giant troll took the presented opportunity and dove from the cliff, heading straight for the murky waters of the lake. As he fell, he could make out the disappointed howls of men, believing their quarry had escaped. Gronka smiled as the cold, dark waves closed over his head. He would not die today of men. Gronka knew the truth, what his defeated pursuers didn't know.

Trolls neither float nor swim.