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Opening extract from

An Awfully Beastly Business – Bang Goes a Troll

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CHAPTER ONE

High on a snowy mountaintop, a blizzard was howling. A tall man in a long fur coat staggered knee-deep through the snow, glancing into the mouths of caves. He gripped his high fur collar, shielding his face from the wind, and peered down into a hole in the ground. 'This is the one,' he muttered. 'Blud! Bone! Over here!'

'Coming, Baron Marackai.'

Two men were trudging towards him through the snow. One was small and was clutching a rifle. The other was big with a frosted beard and was dragging a long black hose.

'Stick the hose down here, Bone,' Baron Marackai ordered.

The big man Bone poked the end of the hose into the hole in the ground. He twisted a nozzle and thick black oil started pouring out into the mountain.

The three men waited silently as oil glugged from the hose. Snowflakes were swirling around them, whitening their hair and clothes.

'It's fr-fr-freezing up here,' the small man muttered. The rifle in his hands was rattling and a snotty icicle hung from his nose. He glanced down the mountainside, his eyes following the hose to an oil tanker and a cattle truck parked on an icy track. 'Can I w-w-wait in the tr-truck, Sir?'

'Stay where you are, Blud, you snivelling runt,' Baron Marackai ordered.

'Yes, B-Baron M-Marackai. Sorry B-Baron M-Marackai,' the small man muttered.

The Baron turned to Bone and stamped his serpent-skin boot. 'Hurry up!' he yelled.

Bone looked down into the hole. 'Nearly finished, Sir.' The hose gurgled and he shook black oily drips from its end.

'Is that the whole tanker full?'

'It's all in there, Sir.'

'Splendid,' the Baron said. 'Blud, pass me the matches. It's time to smoke out the trolls.'

Blud fumbled in his jacket pocket and handed Baron Marackai a crumpled box of matches.

Baron Marackai struck a match and its flame fizzed, then went out. He tried to strike another but it snapped in two. 'These are old matches, Blud!'

'I found them on the reception desk at the hotel,' Blud told him.

'You useless fool,' Baron Marackai muttered. He took the remaining matches from the box and struck them all at once. They sputtered into flame and he dropped them down the hole. There was a whooshing sound as the oil caught fire and flames roared underground. All across the snowy mountain, thick black smoke began billowing from holes and caves.

'Get ready!' Baron Marackai ordered. He hid behind Bone, using the big man as a human shield. Blud crouched beside him.

'Not you, Blud,' Baron Marackai said. 'You're the shooter!' He pushed the small man into the open.

Blud stood shivering in the wind and snow, his eyes darting from left to right as he pointed his rifle from one smoking cave to another.

From inside the mountain came the sounds of underground beasts: growls and squeals, bellows and squawks. Beasts came hurrying from caves, trying to escape the smoke. An ice-bear bounded out into the snow, roaring. A vampire owl flew screeching into the air. A giant wraith spider scurried out, hissing.

'It's the trolls I want!' the Baron shouted.

'There's one!' Bone called.

From a smoking cave, a huge green troll charged out on all fours, swiping the air with its long tusks. It roared, snorting smoke from its nostrils. The troll saw Blud and stood tall, beating its chest. 'Oof! Oof! Oof!'

'Help!' Blud cried.

Baron Marackai peered out from behind Bone, pointing. 'Shoot it, you moron!'



Blud aimed his rifle at the troll. His teeth rattled as he squeezed the trigger and fired. A feathered tranquillizer dart shot out and struck the troll on the chest.

The troll stumbled, then toppled to the ground with a thud. It lay in the snow, face down, unconscious.

Blud spun round as another big green troll ran from the mouth of a cave.

'Aim between its eyes!' the Baron shouted.

Blud fired another tranquillizer dart, hitting the troll on the arm. It tumbled into the snow. Another troll burst out and Blud fired again. The feathered dart hit the troll on the nose.

'Behind you!' Bone called.

Two more trolls charged out from the smoke-filled mountain and Blud fired twice. The trolls fell, one on top of the other.

Troll after troll burst from the caves. There was oofing and roaring, and the whizz and crack of tranquillizer darts firing from the rifle. One by one they toppled into the snow.

Slowly, the mountain fell silent and the

smoke began to clear. More than twenty trolls lay tranquillized and unconscious on the ground.

'Splendid!' Baron Marackai said, stepping out from behind Bone.

He walked through the snow to one of the trolls and kicked it with his serpent-skin boot. 'Sleeping like a baby,' he said. 'Bone, pick out five young ones and load them on to the cattle truck.'

Bone trudged over to inspect the tranquillized trolls. 'How do I tell which are the young ones, Sir? They all look big and ugly.'

'The young ones have the softest skin,' Baron Marackai told him.

Bone knelt down and pinched a troll's cheek, tugging its thick rubbery skin.

Blud skittered over to the Baron. 'What are we going to do with them, Sir?' he asked.

The Baron rubbed his hands together. 'We shall use them in the Predatron,' he said.

'The Predatron!' Blud said excitedly.

'These stupid beasts won't stand a chance.'

'But what if we get caught, Sir?' Blud asked. The small man glanced shiftily from side to side. 'What if you-know-who find out?'

'I have prepared for that,' Baron Marackai said, grinning.

The Baron stroked the small stump of flesh on his right hand where his little finger was missing. He held his hand up. 'Now, repeat after me. Death to the RSPCB!'

Blud and Bone turned down their little fingers then held up their right hands. 'Death to the RSCPC!' they said.

'The RS*PCB*, you numbskulls!'

The Baron picked up two handfuls of snow and pushed them in the men's faces. 'Now load those trolls on the truck! I have important business to attend to.'

Blud and Bone wiped the snow from their eyes and watched curiously as the Baron strode off across the mountain. He was peering into the caves.

'Where are you?' the Baron called. 'Come to Marackai.'

He glanced over at a small hole about twenty metres away. The head of a creature with pointy ears and large white eyes was poking from it.

The Baron waved. 'Coo-ee!'

The creature ducked as Baron Marackai ran towards it.

The Baron reached into the hole and pulled the creature out by its neck. 'Well, well, what have we here?' he said, screwing up his nose.

It was a little grey goblin. It was dirty and wrinkly and wriggled in the Baron's grasp. In its bony hand the goblin was clutching a small black bat.

'Don't hurt me,' the goblin pleaded, its fat snout twitching.

The Baron smiled, his face twisting like a rotten apple core. 'Spying are you, goblin?'

The goblin's white eyes blinked. 'Help!' it called.

'There's no one to help you here, you revolting little creature,' the Baron said. 'The RSPCB is miles away!'

The goblin looked down at its bat. 'What to do, little bat? What to do?' he muttered.

'Give that to me, goblin,' Baron Marackai ordered.

'No! Not my bat!'

The Baron reached for the bat in the goblin's hands. 'I SAID, GIVE IT TO ME!'