

Hollow Bodies - Surface Tension

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

The Cave was cool and damp, which was expected, as the cloaked Gnoll cautiously made his way in. His nocturnal vision was slowly making out the old trail that hadn't been used in centuries. As the bright yellow eyes scanned the walls of the cave, it spotted a few dart traps that barely seemed to be sticking out of the wall. A little bit more study of the soft stone floor, he could see the few triggers for such things, and carefully made his way around them.

A bit deeper into the cave, the soft echos of squeaks could be heard. The faint sounds made the Gnoll shutter and the back of his mane raise a bit. He never liked bats... Actually, next to no rodents to begin with. Let alone anything that could fly. Further in, he could make out the hundreds of creatures hanging from the ceiling. A loud swallow from his throat faintly traveled through the large room, as the Gnoll gathered the courage to press forward. Step by step, he fought his instincts to just bolt for the other side. And step by step, he almost waited for that one small branch, or puddle that would startled the swam above his head. Because, that's just like his luck.

But to his surprise, he made it to the other side. Taking a deep breath, he began to push further down the cave. He wasn't safe yet. And after he got what he came for, he would have to travel through that room again. Once again, the Gnoll shuttered at the thought of them, but it would all be worth it.

Slowly the cave began to change into the faint ruins of an old temple. The carvings on the floor and walls made it increasingly difficult to tell if they were armed. As he slowly scanned the walls and floors, he seen nothing that would be lethal. Another deep breath of relief, and he stepped forward... Only to step on a pressure plate and cause the entrance he came through to be walled off completely. The Gnoll grunted and tried pressing on the wall a bit, but it wouldn't budge. He would have to find another way out afterward. First, he needed his bounty.

Through the old temple, the air was very thin. The faint mix of moss and decay filled it, as he slowly made his way down the halls. A few more dart traps could be seen, along with the occasional spike pit. A few of them already triggered by a previous adventurer whom met their end. Though the Gnoll felt sorry for their souls, such is the consequence in grave robbing: You might just fall into your own while taking from another.

The Gnoll came into a very large room made of several cubic blocks. Between them, there were deep grooves that were placed there on purpose. Almost making a large checkered board pattern. Another step forward, and a large pressure plate began to sink down into the floor. This plate triggered

several large torches around the room to light up, and reveal even more traps. Large swinging blades that came from the ceiling and barely scraped the middle of each cube's surface. While nearly twenty large bladed saws began to move quickly between the cubes. Following the grooves and constantly moving back and forth.

Within the far end of the room held an altar with an old tablet being displayed upon it. That must've been what the older fellow wanted. Something he called 'The Forth Wall'. It's been said that there was evidence written on it that tells of an Otherworld. Supposedly said that the artifact itself was cursed, but that mattered little to the Gnoll.

A loud rumbling could barely be heard over the noise of the blades. A small bit of dirt and dust was dropping from where he entered, and another thick wall began to slide down. He didn't have much time to grab the artifact and make it back out of the room.

Going across the ground was basically suicide. Though it could be done, it gambled the risk of him losing his tail. A few small breaths while he quickly studied how the traps moved, and he bolted across the first few cubes. A couple of saws coming dangerously close to cutting him. The Gnoll jumped onto one of the swinging blades, and then onto another. Swinging across the dangerous floor to the altar.

As he jumped off the last blade, he put too much force into it. The swinging blade ended up shaking in midair a bit, and collided with a floor-saw. Causing a large chain reaction throughout the dangerous room. Quickly, the Gnoll grabbed the tablet and shoved it into a bag, then tried to make his way across the deadly floor. Sharp fragments of the traps began to fly through the air, as a few of the floor saws got knocked out of their grooves and onto the cubes. The cloaked one got lucky a few times, as the rebel saws were hit by the swinging blades. A few pieces got caught in his clothing, but he managed to make it across and slip through the door.

As the large door closed with a loud tremble, the adventurer leaned against it and took a much needed breather. Pulling the artifact out of his bag, he took a closer look at it. Though very dusty, he could see the ancient text that was written on it. Understand it? No, but hopefully the old bird could. Another deep breath caused the Gnoll to get some dust in his snout and made him sneeze on the tablet... Causing it to shatter in several pieces in his hands.

Surprised, he let out a loud whimper while staring at the remains of the tablet in his paws. Then suddenly began to... look around overhead? Wait, that's not part of the script.

"Who's there!?" He... asked to his surroundings while placing the broken artifact back in the bag. "And why are you constantly stating what I'm doing?"

...Seriously, that's not part of the script. What the...?

"What script?"

...You smell like eggs.

"I smell like eggs?"

The hell? How are you...?

"You tell me! How long have you been watching me? Who are you?"

I'm the writer.

"Writer of what?"

...This story? Seriously, what the fish? You're not suppose to... Gah.

"What's wrong?"

Nevermind. Ignore it for now, just find a way out.

"Errm... Okay, I guess. Any suggestions?"

I can't tell you that. I'm a writer, not a strategy guide.

"Not really sure what that means, but alright." The Gnoll began to look around the walls down the hall. "Man, that's going to get annoying from now on." He whispered to himself. Eventually he came to a large carving on the wall that looked rather suspicious. He could even feel a draft coming from the edges of it. "So how do I open it?"

You're asking me?

"Well... Yeah. You're the one writing this, aren't you?"

Yes, but I'm not going to tell you. Look around a bit. Try a few things.

"Like what?"

Well, if you couldn't hear me, what would you try?

"Hmm." The Gnoll studied the carving, what seemed to be a figure with four arms and several objects hanging on each arm. He pulled on a few things, but nothing budged. He pushed on it, pulled, climbed on it for a better look, and even tried to ram it a few times. Tired, he leaned against one of it's sides, only to have the thing give in and turn sideways through the wall. As the Gnoll got back up, and studied the small cave tunnel, he followed it through until he got outside several minutes later. "Phew, glad I didn't have to go through the bat cave again."

That wasn't so hard, was it?

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one who ran into it head first a few times."

Well, if the first time didn't do anything, why would the next three?

"You never know until you try!" Another deep breath- "Do you seriously have to do that!? Every

little detail? This is feeling like an invasion of privacy."

To be fair, it kinda is.

"Why can I hear you all of a sudden?"

Really? Didn't piece that together yet?

The Gnoll shook his head and looked upward irritated.

What's the artifact's name?

"The Forth wall?"

And what did you do?

"I sneezed on it."

Annnnnd...?

"It crumbled?"

Broke. You broke it. You broke the forth wall.

"Well, you don't have to rub it in." The Gnoll crossed his arms as he began to walk. "I doubt I'll be getting paid for this now, but there's still a small chance."

...You'll get paid. But probably not the full amount.

The Gnoll sighed, taking off his cloak. His fur was a dirty gray, with a much lighter gray on the underside. "-What are you doing?"

...I'm describing what you look like to the readers.

"The 'readers'?"

The readers to your story, they can't see you. So I'm describing what you look like.

"Yet, you can see me?"

Of course I can.

"How?"

That's... Complicated. Just bare with it for now.

The Gnoll tossed his head, a little bit of his dark red mane bouncing with the night breeze. His name was Flaytonn-

"What!? No it's not!"

...What do you mean? It says right here that you're Flaytonn.

"...Kassel? My name is Kassel."

...Oh. Fish.

"Who's Flaytonn?"

Nevermind. Ignore that.

"Another complicated answer?"

Yes. But you're right, you're name is Kassel {Case-E-L}.

"What was that?"

What now?

"Why did you pronounce my name in syllables slowly?"

To tell them how to pronounce it? Most people would look at that and think {Cass-E-L}. It's not a common name here.

"Well... I suppose."

You want to add something? Let alone describe yourself to the readers?

"I wouldn't know what to say."

Start with the basics; fur & mane color, height, weight, physique.

"Physique?" The grey one tilted his head.

Your body shape.

"...Fluffy?" Kassel studied at his middle with his paws.

You're not wrong, but I'd probably say borderline chubby.

"Chubby? Really?"

Not shaming here. Heavy eater, are you?

"Only every once in a while. But... that's complicated."

Of course it is. But I suppose everyone has their secrets.

"Can you be completely honest with me?"

I can try.

"Who are you? Why are you writing a story about me?"

I can't tell you why I am. This story is about you, so you'll find that answer out eventually.

"So you're some type of watcher?"

You could say that.

"Could I at least get a name?"

...Bartan. My name is Bartan.

"Well Bartan, I'm Kassel. Glad to have my very own Ominous voice follow me around and record my every movement like a stalker."

I'm not sure what's worse: that statement, or the lack of sarcasm you just had.

"No point in making this a bad thing. It was just very unsettling at first." The Gnoll scratched the back of his neck. "And that is going to take some getting used to."

You can say that again. The night held a thin fog that could be seen from the moon's light. Although it was a bit cool, the fresh air was a nice change from the old Temple's. So much so that Kass decided to take off his cloak, revealing his unusually long mane that reached down to the base of his tail.

"No privacy, huh?"

Well, I thought it was a key point. It becomes important later.

"I'm starting to think you know alot more about me than, well... I do."

And that's the main purpose of this story. We're trying to find out who you are. All of us, including you.

"Who I am...? I know who I am."

Do you? The Gnoll remained quiet for a few moments. We don't have to talk about this just yet, let me finish your description first, alright?

"Okay."

Just enjoy the night while you travel back. And be careful not to slip, your lack of footwear isn't the greatest in the wet grass. Kasse then took a quick look at his wet foot for a moment, then back to the sky for another annoyed look. He wore some slightly baggy pants that were faintly damaged from old age and a few other things, like the previous traps he encountered. A small belt with many tools, usually for thievery-

"I'm not a thief!" He yelled into the night.

I didn't say you were. But those tools are mostly for lockpicking and B&E. You're like a Tomb Raider or something, right?

"I prefer Adventurer. I do many daring things in order to retrieve lost items of ancient times."

So, grave robbing. Another annoyed grunt. I know, I know. It's just connotation, but still. Above that, the Gnoll wore a black, sleeveless shirt, that once again: was slightly damaged. I'm guessing you don't get new clothing very often.

"It's difficult at these times. That, and it's hard to keep them in one piece."

Understood. Anything else you'd like to add?

"Not much else, nope."

Fair enough.

The Gnoll reached the city gate of Elbarenluv by early morning. The day's light was shining bright over the awakening city, and the streets were already being filled with people. The first thing Kassel wanted to do was collect his bounty, then perhaps get some food finally. He felt like he hadn't eaten in three weeks, however it's only been about two.

"You kept track?"

Sadly, yes. He reached the old doctor's home and gave a loud knock on the door. "Go away! I'm doing science!" The bird shouted from inside, giving the Gnoll a puzzled look on his face.

"It's Kassel."

"Kasse? You're back already? I only sent you out a few hours ago."

"You sent me out yesterday afternoon." Kasse said, tilting his head. And once again giving an irritated look at the sky. I'm not sure why you keep looking up, I'm not above you. "You sound like you're in my head."

"Who are you talking to?" The doctor asked, while tending the several minute task of unlocking his door.

"Uh... No one. Long story."

No one. I feel special.

"Well, you're technically not around here, so."

Doesn't mean I'm not real. I'm just... Not exactly there.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What are you doing?" The old bird snapped while finally opening his door and grumbling at the dawn of light. "Get in here!" And the Gnoll entered the workshop. Inside, the room was rather dark. Only illuminated by a dim light from a lantern above. The tables were always messy with books and potions of such, with the occasional scroll here and there. As for the large bookshelves, there were hundreds of them within the Tower Home. "Did you get what I asked of you? Or are you wasting my time?"

"Y-yes. I found it. And barely got out alive, for your concern." The bird snorted at him. "But..."

"I don't like Buts." Kassel did his best to hold in his chuckle. "Now where is it?"

"Right here, Burdock." He handed the Red feathered bird the bag. "See what I did there? You're a bird and you're a doc-"

"That wasn't funny when we met several years ago, and it's not funny now." The bird snatched the bag. In your defense, I thought it was clever.

"Thanks!"

But I'm not sure how many people know what Burdocks are.

"They don't?"

And Mr. Taute is giving you an odd look.

"He is?" The Gnoll looked at the bird who was giving him an odd look.

"...I see starvation is getting to you."

"Not... Exactly." Kasse started rubbing his mane again. "Let's just say, I found the curse of the object. There was apparently a voice inside of it when I retrieved it."

I'm not a voice, and I wasn't inside of the artifact.

"Well, if I tell him I accidentally sneezed on it and it shattered, then I probably won't get paid."

Bartan smacks his forehead.

"You... Did what now?" The bird glared at the Gnoll. Then scampered the bag for the six pieces. He grumbled at the adventurer a bit until he put it on the table and began to piece it together. "It's still in better shape than I expected. So I'll pay you for it. Providing that there's no more to it than this."

"That's all I found. Just be careful not to break it! Or else you'll get a voice in your head narrating every little thing you do." Another odd look from the doctor, then he reached into a drawer. Pulling out a small coin pouch.

"Here. Now leave me to my experiments. I need to translate this tablet afterword to see what secrets it holds."

"About this curse-"

"Leave!" And Mr. Taute shoved the Gnoll outside of the tower, and began locking the door with several locks.

"Well, at least I got some money for food." Kasse shrugged. And began walking down the streets to his favorite pub.

The streets were getting more crowded by the minute, while many people started to come out of their homes and look for work. Most of them were Bi-ped or Anthromorphic animals, with the occasional reptile or bird.

"Why would you think otherwise?" Kassel asked the voice inside his head. Out loud, I might add, and receiving a few strange looks.

Most of the readers live in a world run by humans.

"Humans?"

Tell me you know what a human is.

"Yes, I've seen a few of them. But they're an endangered species by now."

Mmm, your planet used to be ruled by them a long time ago.

"Yeah... I know." A small yolk on the Gnoll's tail caught his attention. As he turned around, he seen a small Lion cub claim it. "Been a while, Cinna. How are you?" Kassel gave it a smile.

"Kassy! Where's my money?" The young female demanded.

"Money?" He questioned, tilting his head and lowering one ear sideways.

"Yes! You still owe me money!"

"I do? I think you're Lyin'." He teased. "Get it?" The Lion shook her head.

"I saw you go into the doctor's tower. Did he pay you?"

"Well, yes, but..." The Gnoll pulled out the small pouch with coins in it, opening it only to have it snatched out of his paws by the cub. As she dug through it, she took a few coins worth.

"This will do for now. I'll pick up the rest later." And the small one ran off, tossing the pouch back to him. You realize that you've already repaid her by now.

"About three or four times worth." Kassel stated, still staring at the cub from a distance with a smile on his face.

Yet you let her...

"People need to eat. And it keeps her from getting into trouble."

Says the person who hasn't eaten in two weeks.

"I'm... Fine. No need to worry about me, Bartan." And he set off once again.

Entering the pub and taking a seat at the bar, Kassel unstrapped his weapon and set it on the floor. Doing so, he couldn't help but stare at it's sheath. Though the design itself was that of a Falchion, it was made for one-handed use. Come to think of it, the weapon itself was getting a little old now. But not as old as his previous weapon. "Back already, darlin'?" The canine barmaid asked him. Though Kassel was never really sure if she was a brown wolf or a coyote. "I thought you left last night."

"I did, and I'm back. It's been a long night Rosie."

"I hope you brought some money with you this time." She said, with a bit of a disappointed look on her face. "You know I can't feed you if you don't have anything. No matter how cute you are."

"It's alright, I got paid. How much for a full meal?"

"10,50, you sure you want to spend that much coin on a single meal?" She asked, while he got out the small pouch.

"I really should eat something. I don't like going so long without it." The Gnoll handed her the coins, and counted how much he had left. About 12,30.

"I don't see how you can do that; go so long without eating. Do you know how to hunt? There hasn't been much for animals lately around here."

"I half know how, but I'm not very good at it. I just..."

"You haven't been stealing, have you?"

"N-no. Not food anyway." Rosie raised an eyebrow at that. "Just a few jobs for Mr. Taute. Retrieving some artifacts."

"On an empty stomach? You're quite something Kassie." She smiled, while she placed his order to the kitchen.

"Call it... A Gift, I suppose." He sighed. Putting away his left over coin and getting a few moments of rest.

Eventually, he felt another large tug on his tail, that more felt like a grope. A Blue Dragonite sat on the stool beside him. "Look how bushy this thing is. Don't you ever get groomed? Let alone shed?"

"Be thankful you don't have fur, Tobyas." He smiled. She was more or less a Wingless Lizard-person, but Dragonites were known for their ability to change into a small dragon. Though it did lack the breath weapon, they could fly. "Why are you here? I thought you took off to the northeast."

"I got another job, but it's not something I want to do alone." The Gnoll looked at her surprised.

"Really? You usually want the coin for yourself."

"Yes, but this one is a little more... Dangerous. You've heard of the Rabbit's Foot, right?" At first, Kassel shook his head. Then motioned for her to stop while slightly gazing at the-Really? You want me to explain it to you?

"Well, you know, don't you?"

"Of course I know, It's my job."

Of course I know, it's my story.

Again, he motioned the Dragonite to stop. *Sighs* The Rabbit's Foot was a ruby about the size of half a fist. It was long, and well... Looked like a rabbit's foot. People say that the stone itself is Lucky, but it's been lost for a while.

"Oh, okay." Tobyas gave the Gnoll an odd look. "Long story. I've heard of it now yes." An even odder look.

"Yeah... Anyway, I'd like to have a partner go with me on this one."

"You mean Meat Shield."

"Same difference. And since no one else wants to do the job, I figured I'd go to my favorite wall."

"And what makes you think I'm cut out for the job?" He asked, expecting a bit of praise. While the Dragonite was still holding onto the Gnoll's tail, she gave it a tight squeeze. The tail seemed to inflate outwardly like a balloon, and omitted a faint Squeaking noise like a... Well, Squeaky toy. Kasse frantically took back his tail. "Don't do that!"

"I still get a kick out of that." She chuckled. "And what's the big deal? Don't like people knowing that you're invincible?"

"I just don't know how much longer it's going to last. And I don't want it to be drained randomly by people getting their giggles out of squeezing me." Another chuckle from the female. "How much is this job paying?"

"Well, I'll be paying you 50,60."

"And how much are you getting?"

"Enough." A small grumble from the Gnoll. "It's up to you if you want to take it, or go back to the board. But not many jobs lately are for helping people. Considering how picky you are."

"I'm..." He glanced away for a moment, while a hint of sadness shone in his eyes. "We shouldn't have to hurt people to survive..."

"That motto of yours would've been the death of you a long time ago, if it wasn't for that ring." Tobyas whispered to him quite harshly. "You have an amazing gift, but you won't use it to make yourself happy." She snorted.

"I'll take the job, providing we do it without hurting anyone."

"There shouldn't be anyone alive. Maybe a few restless spirits around, but."

The Gnoll shuttered. "I never liked the undead."

"And the undead never liked you. So you're an instant aggro magnet. Making my job much easier." She smiled. "I'll be waiting at the gate for you at sundown."

"Sundown? It's bad enough we're robbing the dead, but do we have to do it at night too?"

"Would you rather do it right now? I heard you've been up all night." He sighed and shook his head. "Tonight it is. Bring something blunt." And Tobyas walked off, just in time for the Gnoll's food to arrive.

"Got another job, did you?" Rosie asked him.

"Yeah. I guess I shouldn't be complaining." Kassel took a bite out of his meal, and let out a low murr. "Want some?"

"I really shouldn't. I'm fine, but..."

"But?"

"There's been a few pups lately that have been asking for some food. Perhaps..." He nodded at her, picking up his plates while Rosie pointed to a back table where several children have been sitting.

After finding a comfortable tarp to sleep on, Kassel slept through most of the day and afternoon. Only to be awoken by said 'Ominous Voice' and slightly grumbled a bit before trying to go back to sleep. Seriously Kass, get up. People are waiting.

"Meh... What time is it?"

About an hour before you meet up with Tobyas.

After a few more grumbles, the Gnoll got awake. He made his way up on the walls that made the Citadel. Although the city was big, it was more just a very large settlement. People with nowhere to go often came to the large walled Slum to attempt to find work or provide services to others. Though Elbarenluv has been called the City of Thieves for a long time, the people who live in it have nothing to steal.

As dusk began to set in, Kassel refilled his water bottle with fresh water by the harbor, and sat in wait by the Gate. It's nice to have a breather and not worry about money for the time being.

"Yes. It is."

So, care to explain what Tobyas meant by 'Invincible'?

The Gnoll sighed quietly, and looked up once again. Then shook his head with a smile. "Have you ever heard of Oddin?"

Yes. He was the last human 'King' from centuries ago. Supposedly he was a good man.

"Well, he had several pieces of Jewellery that was named after him. Two rings, an amulet, two earrings, and a belt. I... Found one ring, and well..."

It made you basically indestructable, despite how humiliating it sounds. Kassel let out a chuckle.

"Yes, it does sound... Odd. But I can't say I'd be alive right now without it."

What I find Odd is that you're not wearing a ring...

"No... I'm not."

"Who are you talking to?" Tobyas asked, sneaking up on the Gnoll and causing him to scamper slightly.

"N-no one. When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago. Why were you talking about Oddin's Jewellery? You really shouldn't be saying things like that out loud."

"It's a long story, Tobyas." Kassel said, using the same excuse once again.

"Fine. But we better get moving. Those undead are not going to kill themselves." The Gnoll's head tilted at the strange figure of speech, but climbed down regardless. "Where's your mace?"

"Mace?"

"Yeah, I told you to bring something blunt." She motioned her hammer on her back, along with her greatsword. "Don't you remember the old saying?"

"You can cut the flesh, but you must crush the bone." He mumbled. "I'll be fine." And the

Dragonite tossed her snout at him.

"You're always fine." She teased him.

Chapter 2

The night came quickly. Faster than expected for the two traveling. At times like this, the Gnoll wished himself that he had wings to fly with. Not only to make traveling easier, but to not slow his partner down. Tobyas was able to fly when she transformed, but she could only carry her own weight. Still, restricted flight was better than no flight at all.

"Kass?" Tobyas broke the silence throughout the evening.

"Yes?"

"How long are you planning to stay around here? Around Elbarenluv?"

The Gnoll hesitated at the sudden question. And once again grumbled at the sky. "I'm not sure. I never really had any plans."

"There's rumors that there is a lot of work out west. On the other Continent."

"Those are some pretty old rumors though. Many people have been trying to make it over there. Even some of the luxuray ships have a low chance of making it across."

"Still. It's better than trying to make a living here, isn't it?" She sounded oddly concerned.

"Is something wrong Tobyas?"

"I... was thinking about using the money from this job to attempt to make it. We've been here for nearly 23 years, and nothing's changed. Everyone is still poor and barely anyone can survive in this economy. Why stay?"

"Some of us don't really have a choice."

"But you've always had one, haven't you?" Kass stayed silent. "You can literally float yourself across the oceans. It might take some time, but you could do it."

"There's just... People I know here, and..."

"You've gotta stop worrying about other people so much. How many times are you going to put them before yourself?"

"Tobias..." She snorted at him. "You want the honest truth?" She looked at the Gnoll's now yellow eyes and he sighed. "...I'm afraid."

"Of what?" She grunted.

"That this ring has a limited amount of power. You may think I'm invincible, but... I can't stay invincible forever. And when that power is drained from this artifact, I'll probably die."

"You're afraid of dying?"

"Isn't everybody?" She stayed silent. "Nobody knows what happens to us when we die. I don't even think that Bartan knows."

"Bartan?" The Dragonite asked.

"He's... Errrm."

"Your 'Special' friend?" She said sarcastically. "The one you've been talking to?"

"Yeah. My last job had a cursed item, and well... I got a voice stuck in my head." She shook her snout from side to side with a slight smile over her muzzle. The Gnoll couldn't help but smile at her back.

"I swear, you've got the worst luck."

"Now imagine what would happen to that ship if I was on it?" She chuckled. "People... Need me here, Tobias. I can't just leave them."

"You say that now, but how often do they take everything you have?"

Kass shrugged. "I'll still have my freedom. That's something." She was silent for a few moments. "Why are you so concerned about me anyways?"

The Dragonite sighed quietly. (Because I like you...)

"Because you like me?" Kassel repeated, only to have her instantly stop and stare forward. Her eyes very wide, and her ears becoming purple. "Tobias?" She quickly transformed and flew into the air. "Hey! Wait! Come back here! What did I do wrong?"

I don't think you were suppose to hear her thoughts.

"She was thinking that?" The Gnoll sighed heavily. "It sounded the same to me." He grumbled. "...She likes... Me?"

Apparently so. And now you chased her off.

"But-I...! Ohhh..." Kassel moped, and continued his pace in the direction the Dragonite flew.

About twenty minutes later, Kassel could see Tobyas returning to him. She landed a little early and didn't make eye contact with the Gnoll. "Tobyas, I-"

"Kass. Let's just not talk about it. You said something you shouldn't have, and we're not going to speak of it again. Let's just get this job done and over with."

"I said something?" The Dragonite glared harshly at him. "Y-yeah, let's just get the job done." He said, scratching the back of his messy mane.

A few hours into the night, the two made it to a large, overgrown forest. "Be careful in here, Kassel." Tobyas warned the Gnoll. "It's been said that this place is heavily trapped and cursed. The dead don't rest well here."

He shuttered a bit, having the fur on his mane begin to raise. "I find it rather odd that these places are not completely pillaged yet. It's not that far out from the towns."

"Did I mention this place was trapped?"

"Well, yes. But as long as you keep your eyes open, it's doubtful you'll run-" And the Gnoll fell through a large, covered hole in the ground. Barely grabbing a hold of a few vines before falling into a pit of wooden spikes. "Seriously, why do people build these things!?" He cursed out loud.

"To keep idiots like you from stealing their stuff."

"This was your idea!" He grumbled, slowly climbing up. "A little help would be nice." As the Dragonite tossed her snout, she grabbed a hold of the Gray one's fur on his shoulder, and lifted him up on his feet. "Thank you." He said, dusting himself off. Then looked up again and grumbled.

"What's wrong?"

"...He's just stating the obvious. It gets irritating."

Sorry.

"In any case. Be more careful." Tobyas suggested.

"I'm always careful-" And into another hole... I think the only way that could've been sadder is if

it was the same hole. "Shut up Bartan!" The Dragonite laughed at him, as she pulled him back up.

Very, very carefully making their way inside the forest was slow, but the Dragonite was correct. There was an awful lot of booby traps within the for-...You did not just snicker at the word Booby.

"I can't help it, it's funny."

Sighs Anyway, there was a lot of traps, a few of them already set off and still holding onto their... Springer. A few of them didn't even look a month or two old, whereas their clothing was not rotted that much. Though it was a dark sight, there was nothing the adventurer could do for them. They made their choice, took the risks, and...

Farther into the overgrown forest was a stone crypt, surrounded by many broken statues. Although they were old, they were still of Reptilian kind. "Means this was probably one of the first settlements after the creation of Repnanns." The Blue one gave him an odd look. "What?"

"How could you possibly know that from just looking at them?"

His gaze met the statues once again. "After they were freed from the grasp of Human Captivity, the Reptiles began hiding from them. Usually in forests. They liked to respect their dead by giving them small gems that they would place over their eyes when they... 'Slept'. But many thieves of all species caught onto this, so the Repnanns began to guard their graves from thieves by looking like statues. They would often paint themselves white and stand perfectly still for hours on end to ensure that their loved ones were not robbed." Another odd look. "My... Mother used to tell me things."

"Of course." Tobyas said. "You've never talked about her before."

"There's just not a lot to say."

"And your father?" The Gnoll let out a chuckle, which in turn caused the Dragonite to tilt her head and perk her ears a bit.

"My father's name was Giggles, which used to crack me up." The blue one smiled and shook her head. "What? Gnolls are basically Anthropomorphic Hyenas. I mean, I only met him once or twice, but with a name like that, I just couldn't hate him."

"I swear, you cannot hate anyone." Kassel shrugged at her, not disagreeing. "Come on, let's not stay in here any longer than we have to."

"Alright." The Gnoll carefully led the way down. Relying on his Nocturnal vision once again, he could make out a few things that were shining in the back of the large opened area. Several Coffins were placed in the walls, and even more on the floors. Kasse began to wonder if the entire floor itself was made of coffins, considering how many were in here. "You need to stop giving me ideas."

What's so wrong about the undead anyway?

"Really? You ask me this now?" Kass whispered. Getting another strange look from Tobyas.

"Bartan asked why I don't like the undead."

"Oh... Why don't you?" The Gnoll glared at her, then sighed.

"I think it's because they seem so Hollow. It's like they lost something precious and they'll fight claw and fang in order to get it back... Or get a replacement. I don't like the idea of something taking what is rightfully mine."

"Rightfully yours, meaning...?"

"...My Soul. My Existence. Myself. It's... Unsettling, knowing it can be taken away." Another shiver went up his spine, causing his mane to fluff out a bit. A few more steps, and Kassel swore he could see something move, making his ears scan the area for anything else. A loud swallow came from his throat, then a faint sparkle from the back of the room caught his eye. "Tobias." He whispered. "I think I see it."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" The Dragonite gave him a shove. She withdrew her hammer, and guarded the entrance for now. Keeping an eye on the Gnoll's back... And behind.

"Behind? What do you mean by that?" He asked once again, causing the Dragonite's face to turn purple again and look away. Kassel sighed quietly. Seriously, stop thinking out loud so much. "Stop stating everything she's doing then."

"Kass!" She hissed. He raised his hands to surrender and continued his way across the room. Seeing a few pressure plated traps, and their triggers, he carefully made his way to the Coffin that held the large Ruby. Studying it closely, he seen nothing guarding it that was mechanical. "Hurry up, will you?"

Another loud swallow, and the Gnoll swiftly grabbed the Gem. Upon it's touch, he started hearing the odd hisses throughout the Crypt. Skeletons and Ghouls began to crawl out of the walls and a few Coffins. "You said there was nothing guarding it!"

I said nothing Mechanical. Like Booby Traps.

Another chuckle from the Gnoll. "You said Booby." *Smacks forehead.*

"Get your Furry Butt over here!" Tobias ordered, taking a large swing at a nearby Skeleton. Although they did not seem to be very interested in her, more on protecting the Ruby.

"Protecting the Ruby...?" The Gnoll looked at it for a moment, getting somewhat of an idea. A Skeleton came up beside him and tried to attack Kass with a broken Poleaxe, but he evaded with a loud yelp. Falling prone, and accidently tripping the Skeleton, knocking out one of it's legs. A Ghoul tried to pounce on the laying Gnoll, but he managed to get his foot in the scrawny creature's gut and send it on the opposite end of the Coffin.

Getting up, Kassel barely managed to dodge another swing from a different Skeleton with another loud yelp. The Gnoll then tossed the ruby at the Dragonite on the other side of the room.

"Catch!" He yelled, barely noticing the same skeleton coming back for another sideways swing. Kasse bent backward with a whimper, allowing the Poleaxe to swing above him and hit the Ghoul that tried to pounce on him earlier.

Meanwhile, Tobyas cracked another skull, and looked up at what the Gnoll meant by 'Catch'. Only to have the Ruby bounce off her snout in surprise. She managed to catch it in midair afterward, before it was lost within the crypt. The Dragonite quickly placed it inside of her Chainmail, then took a wild swing at a skeleton. Shattering it to pieces.

By now, most of the creatures attention was at the entrance. Allowing the Gnoll to finally get his Falchion ready, and cut a midair Ghoul. He took a quick step onto the Coffin, then started to make his way across the room. Using the Skeletons as stepping stones. Occasionally a Ghoul would try to lunge at him, or a Skeleton tried to swing, but they were barely blocked by another body.

Kass made his way to Tobyas, the two fighting a few enemies near the entrance for a while. Although, the Gnoll was more aiming to disarm them, while the Dragonite was crushing them with the shear force of her weapon. Nearly hitting Kassel a few times during the swing. "I don't think they're stopping!" The Gray one yelled. Getting randomly hissed at by a Skeleton in a deadlock.

"As much as I don't want to withdraw, we should." She replied, going back up the stairs with the Gnoll following her closely. While heading up, a large slanted door was covering the end of the stairway. As the two rushed up to make it the door slowly closed. The Dragonite made it up first, and reached down for her partner. "Come on!" She rushed him, grabbing his paw and giving him a forceful tug, knocking them both off balance outside of the door.

As Kassel collapsed on top of Tobyas, a loud Squeak was ommitted behind them. Along with a small whimper from the Gnoll. From the position they were in, the Blue one's ears started to turn purple, as she awkwardly looked away. "You can get off me anytime." She said.

"I can't move." He said squinting. "Tail..." It caused her to look behind the Gnoll, only to see his tail; A bit balloony, and stuck in the door.

As she near effortlessly tossed him aside, she got up and studied it closer. "Does it hurt when it does this?"

"Yes. A little bit." Kass grunted. "Just pull it out, please."

"Are you sure? It looks like it might pop if I give it a good tug."

"Yes. Just pull on it." The Dragonite shrugged. Gripping the fluffy tail firmly, she gave it a large pull. The tail came out with a loud 'Plop' and another yelp from the Gnoll. He turned around to comfort the jammed appendaged, looking at the closed stone door. "You still have the Gem, right?"

"Yes." She answered, pulling it out of her chest. "Though it's a bit dirty, it'll still be worth alot." The Dragonite gazed at Kassel, who was still staring at the door. "Don't tell me you feel bad for taking

their treasure."

"N-not really. Just... How they seem to be slaved to it. If we could find a way to free them from it..." She tossed her snout at him.

"The only way we possibly could is if we shattered the gem. And that's not an option. Come on, lets head back to the City for the night. Tomorrow we'll head over to my client out in Lingerriff."

"Lingerriff? That's like three days worth of travel from here."

"One if you can fly." The Gnoll sighed quietly. "Now come on. Let's leave these dead to rest."

"Alright." And they carefully made their way out of the forest.

It was nice to finally be back out in the open, no longer fretting about watching where you step. "You can say that again."

"Say what again?" Tobyas looked at him.

"N-nothing. Just something that Bartan said." Kassel scratched the back of his mane nervously.

"Oh... What is he anyway?" She asked.

"Bartan? He's kinda like a narrator. It's like he's been telling my story in third person, and well... It gets annoying after a while."

You know you like it.

"Hardly. Although, you do have a soothing voice."

Thank you. The Dragonite let out a chuckle.

"What?" The Gnoll asked.

"You. You always seem to find the bright side to everything, don't you?" It made the Gnoll a bit embarrassed, almost blushing.

"Might as well. Seeing everything how it really is doesn't really help our mental stability. It's better to just let the bad stuff go, and focus on the good parts in life, isn't it?" She lightly shrugged at his ideals, not really knowing how to respond. "...Tobyas? Can we... Talk?"

"About what?"

"Us?" It caused her to stop in place and look away. "I-I know you really don't feel comfortable with it, but..."

"Kasse... I don't know how you heard that, but... You were not suppose to. Can we please not

talk about it?"

"Why though? I mean, I... Like you too. But..."

"But?"

"I really don't think I'm the one you want to be with." Oh, come on. Don't tell her that!

"And what makes you so sure?"

"Well... Many things really. I'm clumsy, ungraceful-"

"Those mean the same thing." She said, unimpressed.

"-A bit childish, immature-"

"Those are basically the same thing too."

"-I have the absolute worst luck-"

"Tell me about it."

Tell me about it.

"-I'm rather poor, and don't have alot of money-"

"Kass..."

"And I'm rather... Inconfident. I tend not to take things, especially bad things so seriously. And I often feel like I try to run away from my problems instead of facing them." The Gnoll finished.

"...You're an idiot." She stated. Beginning to walk again. "Where are you going with this?"

"...That you deserve better than me?"

"And that's your decision to make?" She asked sternly.

"I just don't want you getting disappointed-"

"Of what? Your package?" Kassel blushed a bit, his ears starting to lower as he felt himself feeling rather hot. Seriously. If this wasn't rated G for General, she would've ripped your clothes off by now.

"You're not helping, Bartan."

I'm not here to help.

"Kassel, I'm a Dragonite. Dragonites always get what they want. If I want you, then I'm going to have you, even if I have to share." I think she just invited you to a three-way. Once again the Gnoll grumbled nervously. "If I think you're good enough, then you're good enough. If I don't think you are, I'm going to let you know."

Kass found himself rubbing his mane so hard that it began to stretch a bit. "Did I mention you scare the living daylights out of me?"

"That's healthy for you." She said smirking at him. "Now lets get back to the City, unless you want to spend the night out here instead." Another loud swallow came from the Gray one, as he started to follow her.

A few hours later, Dawn began to show up. The horizon over the direction of the city glew with a bright orange and red. Though it did look astonishing, there was something strange about it. It seemed have this outline of darkness. Much like the night. And the warm colors seemed to be... Breathing. "Tobyas..." Kassel said, getting her attention. Although she didn't seem worried until the Gnoll began to run up the hill that covered their sights of the city.

Reaching the top, Kass was able to see the City of Elbarenluv as it was burning brightly. His heart stopped for a moment while the Blue Dragonite caught up with him. "By Oddin's Hand..." She whispered.

"Get down there as fast as you can, I'll meet you inside. We'll rescue who we can." The Gnoll ordered, as he began to sprint towards the city gates. Though not the one that liked to be ordered, Tobyas did what he said. She transformed into her lesser form, and flew towards the city quickly.

Inside the city was a nightmare. The heat was nearly enough to give the people blisters and nearly faint. Every street held bodies of the fallen, and the cries of those who were caught in the flames echo'd throughout the citadel's walls. Silhouettes of others moving in groups to escape could be seen, and the Gnoll rushed towards them.

As he approached them, a few more humanoid figures were chasing after them. He could barely see long blades attached to their right arm. As the creatures cornered the group of survivors, they gave out a loud screech. Just before Kassel gave a heavy slash on one of their backs, then stabbed them in the lower spine.

Following through the clean cut, the Gnoll parried the other creature's blade and gave a quick slash to it's chest. He then kicked to towards the wall, slashed it's chest again, and impaled it with the small Falchion. "Kassy!" Cinna, the small Lion cub from before called to him from the group.

"Go down the street and turn right. The Gate was opened. I want you to take whoever you can find alive and stay out of the city for now!" Kassel ordered.

"What about you?" One of the survivors asked.

"I'm going to see how many I can save." He took a quick look at the creature. It almost looked like a scrawny human. Tall, but thin like it starved to death. It's bone structure and vains were sticking out of it's slightly baggy skin, along with the occassional metal bits. But it lacked eyes. It's teeth were sharp, and it's tongue was unusually long. "Do these things stay dead?"

"We think so. We haven't been able to kill many of them without real weapons."

"Alright, get going!"

"Kassy!" The cub yelled at him again.

"I'll be alright, don't worry about me."

"No, the Fires! Don't touch them! They stick to you like Goo!"

"Stick to you like Goo?" Sounds like Napalm to me. "Napalm?"

It's a flame weapon sometimes... Used here.

"I'll be careful not to touch it." The Gnoll reassured the Lion, and they went their separate ways. Further down the streets, he ran into a few more creatures. They were climbing through building to building, sometimes on fire. However, it's like they didn't notice. "Are they immune to the flames?"

Doubtful. They almost look like they're Dolls.

"Dolls?"

...Hollow.

Kassel remained quiet for a moment, until he heard a scream to the south. He rushed down, giving quick slashes to any creature he seen. Though it may not have ceased them, it might be enough to slow them down. Around the corner, he seen a pair of mates get impaled by the four creatures. The Gnoll dived in with a large chain of attacks to his surroundings. After the creatures were ceased, Kass looked at the two victims, who have already begun to bleed out. Even if he had the right medical supplies, there would be no saving them.

He cursed silently and made his way back out to the streets. Being able to overlook the large harbor, completely covered in flames that seemed to spread from building to building. Anger filled his heart, directed at the ships out in the large bay of water. The thoughts of many of his lost friends filled his mind, even those from the past.

The Gnoll's hands began to feel hot. Very hot. As what seemed to be the air around them was converted into a bright red glow. His paws stressed as the red light began to spread to his forearms. "Bartan...!?"

...Just let it out.

And the Gnoll did. A large shove towards the waters caused the Red light to dissipate. For a moment, nothing happened, but he could feel it. As if they were separate limbs attached to his body. The air around each ship began to be surrounded by the red light and intense heat. When it completely surrounded each ship, it forcefully slammed into it and exploded fiercely. Blowing each ship to hundreds of pieces that then polluted the waters.

The only one that remained was one large Airship which seemed to be spectating. As it began to turn about and withdraw, the Gnoll tried it again. Only to finally give into the immense heat and pass out. As the city burned loudly around him, he once again felt the loss of a home.

...I Wasn't Mistaken.

Chapter 3

He was only pretending to be asleep. Laying lazily in Boss' very large chair. Although he could still hear their conversation about him, he paid little attention. "Boy, things have really gotten to a new low with Boss gone." One thug whispered in another room.

"Yeah, but he beat him fair and square. Even actually killed him! I didn't think that mountain of a man could even die by normal means."

"Not without getting his own ass kicked though. That beast barely survived the fight. Yet still bleeding out, he made his way from one side of the city and limped back to Boss' chair. I can't believe he's even alive after all that property damage."

"I knew Boss had him for a body guard, but that scrawny blue furred thing? Unreal. The thing even tries to look human by wearing clothing. Feh..."

"No use complaining about it now. He may not be as uptight as Boss used to be, but he ain't exactly the carin' type either. Ever since he claimed that chair, the Syndicate has been circling the drain. We ain't even getting any money that we don't earn ourselves anymore."

"There's more to running the Syndicate than just owning the entire city. But unless you think you can beat him, you can't change a thing."

"Ain't no way any of us could beat him now. If Boss couldn't, we don't stand a chance. Wanna hit the Arcade again?"

"Feh, why not?"

They were right though. For a while, he just wanted to lay low. See things from a different perspective. But that Vanity of his... It made him envy that big bastard. Until the night he challenged him. That fight nearly took out an eighth of the city. He never thought Boss could take so much punishment.

But in the end, it was that Vanity that pushed him to victory.

The gunshots could still be heard from a distance. Even though the pouring rain hitting the large tower's glass. (It started about an hour ago, and it's still going.) The beast thought to himself, barely opening his eyes to his long orange coat and his black pants. Still spinning that five foot sword in his paws like it was some type of plaything, slowly carving a hole in the floor. (I thought it would've stopped by now...) His mind started to wonder about what the firefight was about. Who the police were shooting at this time. Maybe even his own guys? But the Beast cared little about them. Once again, he got what he wanted. And after he got it, he just didn't care for it anymore.

A young woman began entering the room carrying a small phone. "Boss. It's for you."

"I don't care about them. If they got into trouble, it's their fault. Let them die."

"Sir, it's not about the Syndicate."

"Then it has nothing to do with me." The beast grunted. His voice getting a little louder.

"...It's Commissioner Layer. He says it's urgent." That got the beast's attention, but only slightly. After an annoyed sigh, he lifted an open paw at the woman, and she placed the phone in his hand.

"What." It was barely a question. He let the tediousness show in his voice.

"Flaytonn? It's Commissioner Layer. We have a bit of a situation."

"What of it."

"It's some type of bug creatures that are attacking the city from the water. We're trying to push them back, but we're being overrun."

"What do you want me to do about it." The beast snarled. "It's your job to protect the city."

"Yes, but right about now we need all the help we can get. And you're the only one we got that can make a difference." The beast tossed his snout. "We can rearrange something afterward, but we need you down there. Now."

Another loud sigh. Though it has been a while since he stretched his legs, and the last fight he was in was over a month ago. "Fine." He caved in. Tossing the phone on the floor without hanging up. The creature dragged himself off the large chair and threw the blade over his shoulder. "I'm going out." He stated to the woman without looking at her. "Don't take any messages."

"Y-yes sir." She said, picking the phone back up off the floor. "He's on his way Commissioner." The woman informed him.

The streets were very wet, and the rain didn't make it easy to aim from a distance. As the SWAT

officer fired at the large bladed insect, it's bullets barely did anything to the nine foot creature. It jumped over the barricade, nearly taking the man's head off, and pinned him. Still firing at it's lower side, the officer desperately tried to kill the bug before it delivered a finishing blow.

All at once, the creature bent a bit backward, screeching. It almost sounded like a high pitch whine was coming from within it. As it's back shell began to glow a bright red, it exploded outwardly, sending it's heated insides all over the barricade. As the insect fell over dead, the man looked at it for a moment, and looked down the street to see that blue creature on the wanted list. "Y-you?"

"Yes, me. Now what the hell are these things?" The beast asked in a very lackadasical tone.

"We don't know. Bullets can't pierce their shells much."

"Obviously. Or else I wouldn't be here." Another creature made it over the barricade and attacked a different officer. The first one began firing at the creature to protect his squad mate, but the beast cared little. "Is there anything else I should know before I walk in? Poisonous or acidic blood? Toxins?"

"What are you doing!? Help him!" The first officer yelled. Only to have the beast toss his snout. He turned around and gave the bug a heavy kick, knocking it on it's back. He then stabbed it hard with the sword, and dragged it through the insect's underside. As the bug squirmed in pain a bit, Flaytonn withdrew his blade and studied it for a moment. There was no signs of deterioration, nor toxic fumes ommiting from the creature's insides.

"Fair enough. I assume that this entire block is evacuated. If not, I'm not sparing them." The beast casually walked over the barricade. A few steps in, a bug lunged at him and tried to cut him with it's bladed appendage. He evaded and tripped the creature to the ground by slamming it hard in the back and kicking out one side of it's legs. Then gave a swift cut to decapitate it.

Another one came forth to attack the beast, only to have him spin behind and slash upward at it's back, and then down to open the cut wider. With a quick hand over the blade of the sword, the Blue one covered it with a faint red glow. Another few bugs were advancing in waves, Flaytonn slashed at the air towards him. A thin red wave pulsed forward with a large arc and severed the creatures in half. Along with a few of the building's walls.

Not caring about what he stepped on with his bare paws, the beast walked forward. Turning the air around his left paw a bright red. A large group of insects charged in, with the biggest one in the lead. As the leader jumped forward with a flurry of swings, the Blue one dodged most of them, getting his clothing slightly cut. In the middle of a large swing, Flaytonn slugged the bug hard in the chest with his left paw, causing it to stagger backwards for a moment. With that glow around his hand gone, he lightly waved 'Goodbye' to it.

That high pitched whine returned, and the leader exploded into a bright red energy. Damaging alot of the street in the process. The energy didn't stop there, it honed in after the group behind it. Surrounding the creatures before exploding again. And again with the next group, and one last time with

the group after. The final explosion caused a few buildings in the intersection to collapse from the sheer force of it.

With the street painted with heated bug insides, the beast continued forward at a faster pace. It's felt like it's been ages since he could cut loose like this and not have to worry about the people of this city. Boss was always strict about how he could do things, it almost made him hate the bastard. But now, there was a great opportunity to relieve some stress.

Further into the city awaited a large group of the insects. It's just what he was looking for. Enhancing his sword once again with the red light, he flicked it towards the ground beside him. Though the blade didn't touch the road he was on, it cut deep into it with ease, as if the weapon was much longer than it looked. Exploding the first few creatures in the frontlines, Flaytonn dashed forward and began tearing through their ranks. A long series of slashes, kicks, and burning red light cleared a path through the large army with ease.

When he got to the center, he was completely surrounded. Constantly forced to dodge and deflect attacks from all angles for about a minute while charging the air around him with that glow. All at once, he retaliated. Stunning the surrounding enemies just long enough for him to finish his concentration, and unleash large circular attack around him.

It felt like the entire world stopped moving for a few seconds, as the high pitch whine turned into a loud roar. Sending a large red wave in a horizontal line around the Blue beast. The wave then circled around four city blocks around Flaytonn, and quickly made it back to the center of the sword, where it then demolished everything within that radius.

Several minutes later, the light faded and the smoke cleared. Everything that once stood was reduced to ashes, or black husks, except for the beast. Catching his breath and slowly regaining his energy, the creature rested on the ground.

A few footsteps could be heard in the direction where he came. "It's done. Tell Layer I want to speak with him." The beast snarled. Expecting a SWAT officer or some cop that was to lecture him about protecting the city.

"Master." The dark figure approached him and kneeled down. He was in a dark navy and gold sneaking suit with a symbol on his left chest. The beast got up and stood before him.

"Haven't seen one of you in a while." Flaytonn replied in rather optimistic tone. "What can I do for you?"

"Master, we found her." The statement caught the creature by surprise. So much so, that he raised the man up to him and looked at him closely. As if he asked to repeat the sentence. "We finally found her."

Kassel could barely feel himself hit the cold grass from a small height. It almost knocked the wind out of him, but got him to start breathing again. "Oh thank Oddin..." He felt someone rather large grip a hold of his body. "Kass, wake up! Please, wake up!"

A small cough in response, and he barely opened his eyes to see something blue and black. "Tobias?" She gave a large sigh in relief. "What...?" He tried to ask, feeling a strange soreness from his body.

"It's alright, you're safe now." She whispered to him. "He's alive!" She shouted at the back. Only to have a few people rush over to him, one of them being red checking his vitals.

"He's probably a bit dehydrated, but he should be fine." A familiar voice said aloud.

"Burdock?" The Gnoll asked sleepishly. Grunting to get awake and trying to focus.

"I have a little bit of water left, he can have it." Another familiar voice. Very young.

"Cinna...?" The Dragonite opened his mouth and poured a little bit of water in. He tried his best not to choke on it, and swallow every drop.

"Are there any others around?" Dr. Taute asked.

"Not that I seen. Anyone that's still alive won't live for very long, or are stuck under rubble. Even then, odds are they were burned badly." Tobias answered him. "The only reason why he's alive is, well... He's just lucky. I found him on the streets, away from any buildings."

"That flaming goo is not any weapon I seen before. And those ships..."

"Ralkor..." Kassel moaned out, finally coming to consciousness.

"The large city to the south of the bay?" Tobias asked the Gnoll. "Why would they attack here? We're on the same side, aren't we?"

"I seen the airship..." He coughed. Sitting up, he could see several people in the back, and his friends all covered in soot. The dragonite especially. By the look of the smuges, she probably carried you on her shoulders. "She did?"

"She did what?" The old bird asked him. Looking at the two females around him and wondering who or what the Gnoll meant.

"You... Carried me?" Tobias looked at him, shaking her head slightly with a bit of a sad smirk. "How's the city?"

"Gone. There's no way to save what's left of it really." The blue one stated. Helping the gray one

sit up.

"It's not safe here..." Kassel warned them.

"I don't think they'll come back to attack. I don't know how, but their fleet was whiped out of the waters. Some people thoroughly believe that Oddin smited them for such a horrible act." The doctor said, giving a glare to a few people in the back.

"It's not about Ralkor." Kass took a few breaths. "You're better off trying to go to Lingerriff today."

"Lingerriff? That's very far from here. We're better off just trying to get what we can and then head out by tomorrow-" The Gnoll placed a paw on the red bird's shoulder. Though he couldn't look him in the eye, the look on Kassel's face was painted with remorse. It was enough for the bird to just stop.

"...We cremate our dead for a reason..." The Gnoll said quietly. He took a breath to collect himself and got up.

"Kass-" Tobyas helped him.

"I... Need to be alone for a few minutes. I'll check the city again in the meantime. There's people who need you here." She nodded in agreement slowly. As the gray one pet the head of the Lion cub and whispered his thanks to her, he walked off towards the gate.

The city was in complete ruins. Nothing but the skeletons of buildings painted black. There was even a few fires still going, but they were no longer a threat to anyone. The only thing that seemed to be standing was the old Bird's tower, nearly connected to the citadel wall. But even that took a little bit of damage-

"Bartan..."

Hmm?

"...What was that dream?"

You mean earlier?

"Yes. I could see him. See what power he had... It looked like what I did last night." The Gnoll studied his paws for a moment. His fur was soaked with soot and ash, and he never felt more uncomfortable. "I heard you say it too... 'I Wasn't Mistaken'."

...

"...Who is Flaytonn? The name you called me in the beginning."

Sighs quietly ...A long time ago, on a different world than yours, there was a man. A Knight.

Who feel in love with a woman, and she loved him as well. But there was a Templar that loved the woman too. When the Templar found out that she loved someone else, he couldn't take it. The Templar turned the Knight into a beast, and the woman into a dragon. Erasing any memories of what they had.

This beast lived a very long time, but eventually he began to remember his former life. As well as his love for her. Now, this beast was also very... Vain. He wanted things. Everything. And the Counterweight of his world gave him the ability to obtain them.

"Counterweight?"

The creator of a universe. His specifically.

"His being... Flaytonn?"

Yes. Flaytonn was gifted with the ability to travel through time to feed his obsession of Want. But he could never find Her, because he was limited to traveling through his lifespan.

"Lifespan? You mean he could only go back as far as when he was created?"

Created as a beast, yes. And even then, that was very hard on him. He attempted several times, but he still couldn't go back to that era. No matter how obsessed he was with her. But the Counterweight also gave him the ability to reincarnate if he happened to die, and he also gifted her the same. However, there was no telling what they will be when they are reborn.

"So, that... Ninja at the end of the dream?"

Eventually, Flaytonn created a League of Spys known as The Scope, and built them a type of time machine. These spys were trained heavily in discipline, and were made only to speculate and observe. He made them so that he could find her easier.

"By spying on multiple timelines?"

And letting them make a living as well. There were ways that they could tell who that woman was, and once they found her, they would report to him their findings.

"Sounds a bit... Messy."

It kinda was.

"But that... Light?"

Flaytonn also had the ability to add a radiational adnormality to the electrons of atoms-

"The what?"

...The ability to 'Charge' things. Examples being objects, water, the air around him or weapons. When these reach a certain charge point, they become lethal and well... Explosive.

"And I have this because... I'm one of his reincarnations?"

Yes. Which is why I mistook you for him at first.

"What does this mean for me? Am I going to completely forget who I am, what I am, after I remember his past?"

I can't answer that.

"Why?"

Because I... Don't know.

Kass remained quiet for a while, as he walked down the remains of his old home. When he got to the docks, he wanted to jump into the water and wash himself off. But the water had been polluted from the ash as well. It was no longer safe to bathe or drink out of. Instead, he just sat down, looking at the wreckage within the bay. Surprised that there was still a small ship remaining and in tact after the attack.

Kass? He didn't answer. What do you think of Tobyas?

"What do I think of her?"

Yes.

"...Is it her? The one he's been looking for?"

...No. She's not.

"She's right behind me, isn't she?"

...Damnit. The Gnoll let out a light chuckle as Tobyas walked to his side and sat down.

"Talking to your special friend again?"

"Yeah, he's trying to embarrass me, I think."

I gotta keep entertained somehow.

The dragonite looked at him with a bit of worry. "...I half overheard. But didn't quite make out everything. Being half a conversation and all." Kass just looked away. "He isn't right, you know. You're not this Flaytonn guy."

"He's been right about alot of things so far." The Gnoll mumbled. The Dragonite placed a rather forceful hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I'm telling you he isn't right about this. Kasse, you're who've you've always been. The only way you're going to become this Flaytonn guy is if you let yourself become him." The Gnoll looked into

her dark golden eyes, only to see them slightly looking behind the two. When the Gnoll looked behind, expecting maybe the others, he saw nothing. Tobias then cupped his muzzle and brought it back towards her. "Besides, I don't like this Flaytonn."

"You don't?"

"I don't know him. But I know who I do like." And she deeply kissed him, to the point where she pushed him on his back. Although their mouths were dry, and Kass found the act very embarrassing, he didn't try to ruin it for her. When she finally broke the kiss, and started stroking his long mane, she whispered to him. "Now, stop worrying yourself over what he said. He doesn't have any control over you, except the control that you give him." Another small kiss, and she got off him and headed back to the others. Ahh... I love strong females. Don't you?

"Did I mention she scares the daylights out of me?" The Gnoll got up. "And how are you taking her side to this? She basically just called you the bad guy."

Am I? Or are you just your own worst enemy?

He thought about it for a moment. Followed by another annoyed grunt. She's right though. You're better off not losing sight of who you are. After all, the story is about you. Not Flaytonn.

Kassel sighed. "I suppose you're right." He mumbled, as he stared out into the bay.

Several minutes later, he returned to the others. The survivors were packing what they could to travel the long road ahead. Though they didn't have much with them, they would have to make due. Tobias made a makeshift wagon to help support the weakened and the minorly injured. Though it wasn't much, it would do the job. "I'm sure word would spread quickly. By the time you arrive, they'll probably be expecting you." She said to them.

"What about my research?" The old red doctor scowled. "I simply cannot make my entire home up and fly with us."

"You'll have to leave it behind for now. Maybe get what you can carry, but only what's important-"

"It's all important." He grumbled, putting a faint smile on the Gnoll's face and getting him noticed by the others. "Did you find anyone else?" The smile faded from his muzzle as he shook his head. "Well then, we best get going. We've got a long trip and I think we're getting a risk of rain."

"I'm... Not going with you." Kassel admitted.

"Come again?" Dr. Taute more or less demanded.

"There's a reason why Ralkor did this, and I have to find out why. There's still a small boat able to sail, and... I'm the only one that can really make it over there with little supplies." The Gnoll couldn't face

them, thinking that this was goodbye- "What do you mean thinking?"

...Uh... Balls.

His friends chuckled at his random outburst. "Kassy? Are you okay?" The lion cub asked him. "Doctor says that you got some mental injury." Kassel glared at the red bird as he kneeled down to her. "Are you going stupid on us?"

The odd statement surprised the Gnoll. "Say Cinna, would you like to sneeze on a special rock for me?"

"Kass!"

"Kass!"

Kass!

"Okay-okay!" He lifted his hands to surrender with a small smile on his face. "But we'll see each other again."

"How do you know?" The cub asked.

"Because like you, Kassy has nine lives. That, and Bartan probably just told him." Everyone gave Tobyas an odd look. "Well he probably did. Either way, you'll need something to get started in Lingerriff." She dug through her chainmail and pulled out the ruby the two went after. "Take this to Volgain on 83rd. Tell him I sent you, and if he doesn't accept it from you guys, I'm going to punch him in his frog face."

"Tobyas..." Kassel said sadly. Knowing what she was planning to use that money for.

"Someone needs to look after you, Kasse. And as long as they stay away from the forests on the way there, they shouldn't be attacked by monsters."

"There's no talking you out of this, is there?" The gnoll slumped his shoulders and lowered his head.

"Nope." She smiled at him, walking past and giving the others a wave.

Dr. Taute sighed quietly. "Alright then. You two be careful. And don't drink the water until much further out into the bay."

"Don't worry, I'll protect her."

"I was actually more concerned about you." The bird snorted.

"I always knew you cared." He smiled at him. Again with the lack of sarcasm. "What? He said he was concerned about me."

"At this rate, I think we all should be." Cinna teased him. Then giving him a big hug. "Come back to us, you still owe me money." It made the Gnoll chuckle.

"Alright. Take care of yourselves for now. I'm going to find out what Ralkor is up to." And once again, he headed towards the city.

Kassel met up with Tobias at the wrecked harbor, getting the small ship repaired and ready. "Tobias... Are you-"

"Don't ask me if I'm sure." She interrupted him, rather cheerfully with a bit of sadness in her voice. She turned to face him, and her gaze met upon the burned city. "It was my home at one point too." She said, getting the Gnoll to look back at it and walk backwards to see it in her perspective. "Even though I left it a few years ago, I don't think I've ever been happier here. We had nothing but each other and hunger. No food, barely anything for refreshments. No luxuries. We just had our family."

"Tobias..."

"Even after I left, I still thought about this place." She continued. "And how I missed everyone. I was just too proud to say it. Too afraid of that fear known as embarrassment. It's why I can't show it in front of others..." The blue one stayed quiet for a few moments. "My point is, Ralkor took something away from me as well. Something away from all of us. And I didn't realize that I could somehow lose more, until you suggested... This." As much as he wanted to comfort her more, he just placed a paw on her shoulder as she faced away from him. "So don't try to talk me out of this. I can't lose another person."

"Alright. But it's a full days sail across the bay. Are you going to be okay without something to eat?"

"I've learned how to swim well and catch fish. I just can't do it with armor on." She resumed preparations, getting the Gnoll to blush alot with the mental image in his head. "So don't worry about me. If you stop trying to picture me naked, and start helping me prepair this ship, maybe I'll catch a few for you too." She smirked at him. Seriously Kass, get your mind out of the gutter. It's rated G for General, remember?

"I don't even know what that means..." He grumbled as he began helping the Dragonite. She gave him an odd look, more to fill her in. "G for General. He keeps saying it whenever you..."

"Want to tear your clothes off?" Another embarrassing whimper. "Well, we'll have to violate the next part to the story."

Kass grunted, burying his face in his paw. "Not you too! I get enough of that from Bartan!" The Dragonite chuckled at him. "But I suppose you're right. This story is not done yet." As the Gnoll stopped for a moment and gazed to the southern waters, he took a deep breath. "Our answers lie just over the horizon."

"Then lets get moving quickly. If we can get them, perhaps we can stop another invasion."

"I'll launch us off." He said, as he went to the port and gave the small ship a few shoves. Then a few rams, as Tobyas quietly chuckled at the odd squeaking sound it made. She then jumped off as well, grabbed the Gnoll, and tossed him back into the ship. He made a loud yelp, then felt a large push that sent the ship a bit forward into the waters. "I had it." Kass grumbled, only to hear her chuckle at him again.

"Of course you did. You just need to save your strength." As they finished preparations for the sails, she took a deep breath herself.

"We might as well rest a bit. Burdock said that the waters quite farther out should be okay to drink and... bathe in." He said awkwardly, trying to lie down comfortably while facing away from her, so she wouldn't see him blush again.

"I could use some rest." She agreed, then laid down beside him. And before he knew it, he was sound asleep, relaxed by the rocking of the boat...

Setting Sail To Trespass The Shore of Another World...