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Scary, Scary Monster

A Strakx Never Realm Tale

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Rustrum Ingotbeard filled the tall, hexagonal wooden mug which sat before Strakx with ale. Rustrum was your typical dwarf. He wore his chainmail and fur armor so much that it was hard to tell where his long red beard ended and the fur of his armor started. Wearing it in the high summer bothered him no more than wearing it in the depths of winter. As a goblin, Strakx found this hard to fathom, but he accepted it. After all, he didn't have to wear the mangy thing. Once the mug was full, the dwarf pushed it over to Strakx across the table. Strakx could smell the sweet grains what were used to make the concoction. He respected the dwarf for using fresh ingredients. Rustrum watched the small goblin with curiosity as the mug was far too heavy for one of his stature to lift.

Strakx reached into his bag and pulled out a long, white tube. He bent the top easily and placed the long end in the ale. Placing his greasy lips on the other end, he began to draw the ale through the tube. "So what you're using there is a thing from this other world," remarked Rustrum.

"Yea," said Strakx without releasing the tube from his mouth, "they call it a straw, but I don't think you want to stuff your mattress with them."

Ingotbeard gave the goblin a good stern stare. "And you say none of us are real? We're all characters in some kind of game?"

Strakx belched. "That's what they say."

Rustrum raised on eyebrow. "But you say they are not gods."

"I told you already, that's what they claim. Who knows. You can't trust the gods. Real fickle bunch of SOBs if you ask me," said Strakx. In contrast to the dwarf, the goblin was wearing a long, brown leather coat with only a ring of fur around the neck of his green cape. Like most dwarves, Rustrum refused the wearing of a hat, but for Strakx a good headpiece was an artistic statement. The goblin's preferred style was a leather pull-over which pushed down his long ears. On the very top sat a stuffed toad, made from the same leather. Strakx had yet to be able to afford a real stuffed amphibian, but it was on his bucket list. All in all, the goblin was about a third the size of the dwarf bartender.

Rustrum shook his head. "I don't know," he grumbled, patting his armor with his hands, "I feel real enough."

Strakx cocked one ear up. "How would you know? Maybe how you feel right now is exactly how a game character feels."

"I thought you told me you were a game character too," The dwarf snorted, "how is it you can cross into this other world? Their world."

Strakx gave him a quizzical look, "How in the underworld would I know? I'm a warcaster. I deal in magic, spells, and illusions ... mostly illusions," he muttered. "You want to know the secrets of the universe and the gods you gotta talk to a priest."

"Drink your ale," Rustrum bellowed. "Best not to involve any of those suckers or will be here all night listening to them drone on relentlessly about this demigod and some obscure demon. Until you are ready to pull out your own eyes and stuff them in your ears to stop the noise."

A fairy flew in through one of the tavern's open windows. Strakx always found them to be a touch disturbing. They were perfectly formed little humanoids about the size of a human's thumb. If it wasn't already creepy just because of its diminutive size, the flapping dark green wings gave it an extra edge. This one had long blond hair and ... and yea, it had long blond hair. That was about it. It hovered over by Rustrom's ear whispering something.

"Thanks," Rustrom spoke to the creature softly as if a loud sound might break it or something, "I'll inform the constable." In the end, it simply flew off. If you could call it flight. The thing jumped about the room like a rolling ball gone mad in lumpy meadow. Flitting about the room in a bizarrely arbitrary manner. The next thing you knew, it was gone out of the window.

Rustrom turned to the goblin warcaster. "Got an assignment for you. You know the bog north of town?"

Strakx gave him a wry smile. "Sure do. Overflowing with flies and enough smells to make a horse fall over in its tracks. Nice place. I like it."

"Well, someone has fallen in," Rustrom snorted.

"Good for them," said Strakx, "The swamp will give 'em a smell they'll never get out of their clothes. Maybe they can build a house out there."

"You have to go and rescue them," announced Rustrom.

Strakx gave him a look of complete indifference. "Me, what for? Why do I care? Folks fall all the time, especially humans. They're big critters. They can pick themselves up."

"You're the constable," Rustrom retorted, "It's your job."

The goblin crunched up his face. "Don't you have a pulling people from bog department? How about a fire department? It's not my area. Think of this as a cat caught in a very muddy tree."

Rustrom gave the goblin a look. "All right." replied Strakx, "I'll go. I could use the vacation scenery anyway." Strakx pulled out his straw and put it back in his carrying bag. The chair legs squealed as he pushed it across the floor, away from the table. He jumped down from the seat and headed for the door. "I guess I'll see you later."

Outside, Strakx grabbed a coil of rope from one of the empty construction sites around town and headed off for the edge of town. No one stopped him. There was not a single person in sight to deter him. They were all out mining for gold. He threw the coil of rope around his shoulder and headed off for the woods.

The journey was a miserable one. Strakx hated it. The weather was clear, the sky a bright blue. The birds were doing their stupid chirping thing. Damned annoying if you were to ask Strakx. The trees provided nice shade, but the smell of fresh pine needles made the goblin's stomach turn. He was happy to get to the putrid smell of the swamp. The insects buzzing around his head, drinking and worshiping the beads of sweat which appeared on his forehead.

From the grunts and groans, he could follow the sound to the imbecile who had managed to get stuck in the mud. Through the bushes, Strakx could see a human in full plate armor. It was one of those mirror finish jobs which practically glowed in the daylight. It was so reflective, you could shave in one of the

arm bands. No wonder the guy was stuck, He was wearing 75 pounds of shiny steel armor. Might as well strap two giant boulders to your legs and go swimming. Strakx got the rope off his shoulder and tied one end in a loop. As he stepped out into the light from the undergrowth, rope in hand, the armored figure stopped to gawk at him.

His face was obscured by the helmet, but not his voice. "What ho? What sort of vile creature is this I see before my eyes?" He muttered.

The goblin snorted. "The local Constable from Nagdohar. Here to save your sorry butt." He started to swing the rope over his head to throw it. He'd seen the trick done in festival plays, only the target was usually a cow. It looked easy enough.

As the goblin was preparing his rescue, the armored man took an ornate crossbow off his back, loaded it, and pulled the trigger. The bolt slammed into the trunk of a tree not a fingers distance from Strakx's head. The goblin warcaster threw himself back into the bushes with a sort of elemental vigor. "Life is not going to work out well for you if you kill the people trying to help you."

"Begone demon," screamed the armored man. "I'll countenance no imp from the underworld to plague me. Take your foul visage else ware."

Insulted, Strakx shouted back, "I'm a goblin, you blind moron. Can't you see I don't have wings. Besides I'm green, not red ... or are you colorblind as well as terminally stupid?" A second bolt whizzed by his head. No doubt shot in the direction of his voice as he was now well behind the bushes. "I could just wait here until you run out of arrows, but you might sink over your head by then."

Another bolt buried itself into the ground at his feet. Strakx snorted. "Right. I'll just tell them you drowned then. Ta-ta."

"Wait," the armored man's voice shouted back. "What interest does a foul imp have in saving a goodly warrior of the realms?" The man seemed to be having second thoughts about being left to drown.

"Oh, I don't know," Strakx retorted, "maybe it's my job. Maybe the gods hate me. I don't question the gods. Best not to ask too many questions of crazy people. Which is why I am leaving you here, in this delightful place. Adieu."

"No wait, gentle creature," the armored man called back. "Perhaps you could throw me the rope and tie it to a tree before you leave?"

"Fine." Strakx relented in disgust, "Just keep your stinking projectiles to yourself for the few moments." He crawled out over the bush only to see the crossbow pointed directly at him.

"Take that!" the warrior cried out as he pulled the trigger. The exclamation gave Strakx a head start and he threw himself into the dirt. He scrambled back out and over to the other side of the bush before the man could reload.

"Ah, yes," Strakx exhaled sharply, the righteous killing of monsters. Who cares if you have to lie to do it. I'm sure your lies and baseless deceptions will be ignored in the underworld. Moron." The goblin warcaster put his hand into his bag and pulled out a fist-sized ball of the darkest black cloth. Tossing it

on the ground, it unfolded into a perfect circle of inky darkness. "I have no idea why I am doing this but stay there. I'll be right back."

The armored man couldn't see what was going on behind the bushes, but Strakx leaped into the air and plunged ... head first ... into the black hole.

The basement room was mostly empty, only Isoroku was there, hiding behind his glowing picture of light. The round piece of cloth fell to the ground at Strakx's feet. He retrieved it and put it back in his carrying sack. The room smelled a little bit of mold and baking soda.

Lifting his head up, Isoroku asked, "Where'd you get a portable teleporter hole?"

Strakx finished tucking it away in his bag. "Oh, lying around on another character sheet."

Isoroku blinked, "You stole it from another player?"

He gave Isoroku a wry smile. "I wouldn't say I stole it. Let's say it's on long-term loan. You know. While they are not using it."

Isoroku raised one eyebrow. "How long term are we talking about?"

The goblin shrugged his shoulders. "Not long. Only my lifetime and the lifetime of all my descendants. But enough about the hole. I got this problem ..."

Isoroku looked back down at his keyboard, "You mean the hedge knight in the bog?"

"How did you know?" Strakx demanded.

Isoroku gave him a sheepish grin. "He's an NPC for tomorrow night's game. He kinda got away from us."

Strakx exhaled slowly, "Yea, well I don't know what Mr. NP is seeing and I don't really care. You have anything which might help me out. Some armor? A shield, perhaps?"

Shuffling his papers, Isoroku gave the goblin a frown. "Nothing you could wear. Or pick up," he mumbled. His face brightened as he seemed to have found what he was looking for. "Ah, here we go. You can take this with you."

The goblin snatched the sheet of paper with a greedy grip. "What in the name of all the stupid, mindless gods is this?"

"It's a character," Isoroku replied. "If you take the sheet back with you, then he becomes real."

"What?" Strakx spat. "This is all you've got? Oh, this is going to help a lot."

Strakx was being sarcastic, but Isoroku didn't pick up on it. "Your welcome." He went back to burying his head in his laptop. Strakx gave him a look. "Never understood the name of your thing." Strakx muttered. "Laptop. You never have it in your lap, it was always on the table. You stupid humans can't even name things right." He dug the portable hole out of his sack and placed it on the floor. He took a feet-first leap into it, holding the piece of paper.

He dropped out of the sky and landed with a hard thud. Right beside him was another goblin with a cart filled with more junk than a hoarder kept in his basement. Strakx held up his hand which, until recently,

was clutching a piece of paper. “Are you this guy?” Strakx asked, holding up his empty hand. Once he noticed his hand was empty, he pulled it down. “I don’t know what you are referring to, but the name’s Spite. Pleasure to meet you.

“Spite?” Strakx asked.

Spite started adjusting all the ropes which were holding down the trinkets in the overloaded cart. “Yea, my mom gave me the name. She claimed it referred to having a kid with my dad. She said she did it just in ...”

“... spite of him.” Strakx interrupted, “I get it.”

Spite looked astonished. “How did you know? Did you know my mom?”

“A lucky guess,” Strakx replied. Gazing at the mound of odd parts in the goblins’ cart, he shook his head. “What’s all this?”

Spite stood up proudly, “This is my stuff. I build things. I’m an engineer.”

“Augh,” Strakx moaned. He headed off into the bog. It was just as dismal as he remembered. He breathed in the wonderful stinking air. Only this time, he knew where he was going. Strakx tried to shoo away some butterflies as the two of them marched over the spongy ground. “Damn things,” he muttered. “Why all the colors? Couldn’t you be a nice earth tone? Green? Brown? Maybe black? I trade you for a good moth any day.”

Strakx and Spite circled around the back of the knight. By this time, he had sunk low enough he couldn’t turn around, so they were safe from being shot at. “I have just the thing,” Spite yelled as he dumped the contents of the cart on the ground. Before Strakx could blink an eye, Spite was busying playing with the parts which now littered the bog floor.

Meanwhile, Strakx threw his rope. The goblin was hoping it would land around his neck, but no such luck. It fell over his shoulders and caught his chest when Strakx started to pull on it. The armored man turned his head to see what was happening. “Oh, it’s you again, vile monster.”

“What’s with you?” Strakx protested. “I come out here to rescue you and you try to kill me. What’s up with that?”

The man stammered. “You are one of those,” he muttered. “You know. Illegal interlopers. Allow me to introduce myself. Name’s Henri Pevee, Knight of the Border, Protector of the Realm. I am tasked by my king to keep out all those creatures who would encroach on the lands of men ... like you, foul creature.”

Strakx stopped pulling on the rope. “Encroach? I live here, you moron. I have a job. I’m the frigging Constable from Nagdohar.” The goblin raised his voice, “I pay taxes.” Strakx stopped to think for a moment, rubbing his chin. “Well, I might pay taxes anyway. Besides even tax evasion is no reason to kill anyone.”

Henri was adamant, “You are an interloper.”

“And you’re stuck in a swamp. You want to call each other names for the rest of the afternoon?” Strakx retorted. “What are you doing out here in the swamp?” Strakx asked.

“Looking over the construction route,” Henri explained with glee. “We’re going to build a wall to keep you miscreants out.”

“How’s do you figure a wall is going to help?” Strakx asked, “we’re already here.” The goblin yanked on the rope, but the knight was stuck tight in the soil. “Yea, Spite, you want to give me a hand here?”

The Goblin engineer gave him a cheery reply. “No need.”

Strakx dropped the rope and turned to protest the lazy goblin’s attitude. Before he could utter a word, he found himself looking at a huge ramshackle machine. There were gears and slides, boots swinging from the end of two by fours and an assortment of hinges, pipe elbows, and brackets. There was even a cow hanging from a rope. “Where did you get a cow?” was all Strakx could manage to get out.

“She was pulling the cart,” Spite explained as he tightened a gear with a wrench, “but she got tired. I put her in the back with the rest of the stuff.”

The goblin warcaster sputtered and stammered. It was unusual for Strakx, he was rarely without something snide to say. Spite took the rope from his hands and attached it to two hooks which appeared at the end of a set of chains. The engineer took Strakx by the hand and led him over to a wooden seesaw type of arrangement. In point of fact, it was little more than a piece of lumber balanced over a log. “Here,” Spite explained, getting up on the high end. He held a hand down to Strakx.

“What do you want me to do?” Strakx complained.

“Climb up here.” Strakx took the goblin engineer’s hand and struggled his way up to the high end of the board. Now there were two of them standing on it.

“Great,” Strakx snorted, “now what?”

The engineer grinned. “Now we jump.” He started to jump up and down like a madman or a small child. Before Strakx could join in, the plank fell. Strakx waved his arms around as if he might fly. He had a hard time keeping his balance as the wooden beam hit the ground. There was a great sound. Strakx watched as gears turned, doors flew open, and gloved hands extended on a crisscross arrangement of wood slats and screws. At one point, the group of hens was released from inside a tiny box. This excited the cow, who kicked a round piece of wood painted like a target. It swung out of the way and activated another beam with a string attached. The cow suddenly fell about two feet, landing on another board.

The device groaned and creaked as if it was about to collapse. In the end, a windless began to turn and it pulled on the earlier setup chains with astonishing speed. With the same speed the knight was pulled from the muck. It was so sudden, both Spite and Strakx fell backward.

Everyone struggled to get up, but the knight regained his footing first. He drew his sword and advanced on the two goblins with a cold-hearted stare.

“Wait a minute,” Strakx yelled, getting to his feet. “Isn’t there some code which prevents you from killing someone who just saved your life?”

The knight held his swing. “Yes,” he replied, “But I’m ignoring it.” He swung the sword. Strakx was barely able to avoid the blow. The steel was coved in mud, making the weapon unwieldy. If it hadn’t been for this, the goblin would have been cleaved in two halves.

“Just hold on a minute, sir knight.” Strakx held up a hand. “I know where there’s a whole town of interlopers. Dwarves. Squatting on your lands. Why if you kill me, you’ll never find them. Then what? You’ll have killed two goblins and let a whole town of dwarf interlopers escape.”

The knight held his blow once more. “You have a point,” Henri remarked. “Very well, lead me to this nest of illegals.” Henri used the point of his sword to prod the two goblins forward.

“You have any vials of sleep gas in your cart?” Strakx asked Spite.

“I’m an engineer,” Spite protested, “not an alchemist.”

Henri prodded then forward with his steel blade one more. “What are you two talking about.”

“Nothing,” Strakx muttered, “Just a fellow I want you to meet. Rustron’s going to love you.”