

# The Chasings

Bogo carefully sliced tiny tongues of wood from the end of a smoothed bamboo rod, forming a spike. He had planted a patch of bamboo at the start of summer—his microscopic contribution for the fight against global warming, before things got sticky and hot...and then cold again. It had grown so fast; he was amazed. How is it that everything in my life moves so thickly and yet bamboo thrives no matter its environment?

Bogo stayed with his thoughts. This is the last time. I will no longer be made to feel like a court jester, like a disposable. Bogo thought back on the last campaign they played, years ago now. Roland the Stout, his paladin, was already a level 12, one of the strongest in the group. His companions were Sam, a level 10 frost wizard and Leonard, a level 9 thief. They had nearly conquered their campaign on The Isle of Desolation, but never could get past the unhygienic and hooded Duke of Death and his minions, who had kidnapped the refined Princess Dodonne, allegedly now locked away in the northernmost Tower of Trummle.

Bogo and his childhood friends had played Dungeons and Dragons for years, until David, their Game Master, decided he was too mature for “these kid games,” as he called it. Their troupe splintered and scattered after that, each feeling that David was somehow right, that they all needed to grow up, to find their own ways, to start their own real-life adventures. Now Bogo had his own adventure.

Recently Bogo had been wondering if he was in love. After winter break Jenny had so sweetly laid her head on his shoulder while they waited for history class to start. He was rendered mute with her soft curls splayed across his shoulder blade, and even his extraordinary nose relaxed completely as it lingered on her subtle lavender perfume. This provoked hemming and cooing from their classmates. She smiled and fluttered her eyes and Bogo switched incandescent; he was sure his face would have lit

the room if someone turned off the lights. He'd been pretty sure that she liked him. This was all new for him, and he'd dreamt of stretching upwards to kiss her against the tiled and smudged hallways of Bronson High. He imagined walking her to class, and at some point—when he was ready—letting her know that he liked her too. But he was terrified not only of her rejection, but most of all of his peers' cruelty. He'd already been through so much of that. He'd successfully buried so many painful memories that now only his body recalled them.

But he knew that the situation was even worse than that. He was gutted, devastated. Just the day before, Jenny had seen him profoundly humiliated, had seen how weak he truly was. If he couldn't defend himself, then how could he defend her, his dove-like ink-haired princess? He knew how it worked. She'd spend less and less time talking to him, she'd forget their sweetened alone moments in the halls and in the courtyard. The little stupid jokes between them, the freely-given smiles, would cease. Bogo had learned that most people were brave as long as their braveness was condoned—a *reasonable* braveness. Risking her reputation, fighting the world hand-in-hand with Bogo, that kind of extraterrestrial bravery was nonexistent. And maybe she wouldn't even understand it all herself. But she'd surely prefer a boyfriend who was "normal," who was able to stick up for himself and for her. Even the more reason for revenge, thought Bogo. At least I'll take some pleasure from this whole catastrophe, even if my princess is no longer a reality.

His sensitive nose tweaked itself in revolt even before Bogo had opened the glue bottle's seal; he felt the acidity holed up in some place deep in his sinuses. As he bound the turkey feathers to the shaft with silk thread and glue, the unbiased mirror captured him. I know you, he thought. He felt that familiar crest of inexplicable shame and inescapable self-pity. A hook. He glared at its quick dramatic downtrend, which finished like a pointing trowel. Why hadn't his parents just gone ahead and named *it* as well? Ambitious—a nose always planning its escape, from a body that was incompatible. Could he really blame it?

As Roland the Stout gained experience, wisdom and treasure, Bogo's body had transformed. His voice deepened, his features became sharper, including his most prominent feature—his tremendous nose. It assumed its own personality. Idiopathic, the doctor had said about his condition. It sounded shameful and they made fun of him. The doctors couldn't figure it out. No one could.

They were all revolted by this, he could tell. They called him mean things—dwarf, midget, even a halfling—as if he had no earthly mother, as if he'd been summoned directly from The Isle of Desolation, where dragons and pixies were his courtyard playmates. It all boiled down to them *feeling* uncomfortable. He knew what was behind their misinformed and rather coarse thoughts—what was the expression? All roads lead to *nose*? His abominable nose. It did things its own way, it moved through the world with its own nosiness you might say, even as he supervised it from a distance. The mirror reminded him anew of their chained existence. What a sniffer, he thought.

He recalled yesterday's incident, which continued to broil his brain. He was outside in the courtyard and had finished the last bit of his saccharine Twinkie when an unnatural deep voice cracked, whiplike.

“What's your problem, goblin?” Charlie said.

Bogo looked into his eyes, fairly, questioningly, yet terrified of his attention.

“What do you mean?” Bogo asked, rather too politely.

“I mean what I said. Why do you look down on everyone? You fucking aristocrat, you. And why is your nose just so fucking huge?” Charlie stared down Bogo, encouraged by a wave of laughter.

“It's a condition,” Bogo finally stammered, his stomach complaining now after the poisonous chemistry of dry high school pizza and Twinkie. He belched and started his escape, but he would have been wise to heed his twitching nose; it must have picked up a pheromone.

“Don't you turn your back on me. You're condition is that you're a fucking elf.”

At that Bogo heard and then felt a brutal smack upon his neck from behind. He instinctively covered his exposed flesh and turned, as his eyes brimmed.

“What the hell?” Bogo said.

At that, Charlie and his boys laughed. And laughed. And laughed.

When Bogo looked up, attempting to readjust his eyes to the prosaic world of schedules and assignments and disappointing interactions, still glassy-eyed and ringing like a bell, it was then that he saw her. He didn’t know that Jenny had witnessed it all. She blushed terribly—mortified, for Bogo. A blushing so infectious that his internal organs also glowed scarlet. Bogo went straight home after school to begin hand-crafting his arrows.

Bogo crested the suburban street, a paladin from another realm, jostling to slay the beast, his bow in his right hand and two extremely hand-sharpened arrows in his left, held achingly against his handlebars. The boys stopped shooting hoops and held the ball. Charlie grinned.

“Hey, look who it is. Mother fucking gremlin himself.”

But Charlie’s smile faded and then disappeared as Bogo notched the arrow and pulled back carefully, so as not to lose his delicate balance. Thwack! Charlie’s dive into a rose bush—which must have really smarted based on his cry—revealed, just behind where he’d stood, his innocent and uninvolved orange tabby. If only Bogo were truly a gremlin or magical halfling, he’d have instinctively cast a freeze spell on that flying projectile and broken it into thousands of tiny crystal shards. But alas, even with his special nose—powerless here—and size, in the end he was only human. The cat squealed and lay there meowing loudly and often. Bogo nearly fell from his steed, sweat slicking his palms, as he pedaled frantically to get back home. They didn’t come for him that day, surely plotting their own sweet revenge. Bogo briefly considered sending Charlie’s family an edible arrangement for their misfortune.

It was then that the chasings began in earnest, daily. Bogo prayed for relief, for God to make it go away. They each followed the same general set of events: Charlie and his boys waiting for Bogo after school, or attempting to lure him away from home on the weekends; Bogo running for his life, down streets, through vein-like alleyways and backyards, over recently-groomed hedges and rusted fences.

Spring had sprung, but despite the colors, sounds and scents, Bogo was tired. He'd been running for weeks now. As he waited at the bus stop, he picked up on a certain kind of silence. Most can only smell with their noses, and even then, only pick up the strongest and most pungent odors, but Bogo could rely on his nose, much like a cat, to inform him of all kinds of subtle changes in the air, such as: a whiff of of intrigue, a discovery of environmental tension, or in this case a snuff of danger. And danger there was. If nothing else, Bogo could always count on his nose.

Charlie and his boys peeled themselves from the surrounding bushes, like a band of paid assassins. Charlie was deeply hooded, like a boxer entering the ring.

“Look, I’m really, very, truly sorry about your cat. You know I didn’t mean that,” said Bogo.

“Oh, I see,” said Charlie, “you only meant to kill *me* with your razor-sharp arrow?”

“If you touch me again, I promise, that will be the last time,” said Bogo.

“What’re you gonna do? Go home and carve another arrow so you can murder another defenseless animal? You’re pathetic, Bogo. No one likes you because only a pussy like you lives in a fantasy world. But then again, I’m not even sure you’re human.”

Bogo could smell Charlie, even at his slowly-closing distance of 20 feet. His unhygienic scent was complex—a bouquet of BO, halitosis, and notes of death. Bogo now saw *him*—The Duke of Death. The evil one who had imprisoned the refined Princess Dodonne in the northernmost Tower of Trummle. This was no earthly battle.

The Duke of Death pushed Bogo, grabbing his neck in a chokehold and squeezed with considerable might. Bogo couldn't breathe and his world grew dim. Patience, Bogo, patience. You've waited this long...

"Hey, Charlie, let him go," one of his boys said. The other said, "Hey man, he can't breathe."

The Duke of Death released Bogo, grinning down at him, a superior grin, one that contained full power and confidence.

It is *I*—Roland the Stout, thought Bogo. Level 12 paladin. He's no match! Roland the Stout slammed The Duke of Death with a buried strength new to Bogo. The Duke faltered backwards, unhooded; he was stunned and shook his head. "You knocked my tooth loose!"

Bogo ran and ran and ran. When he arrived home he was terrified of what Charlie would do to him now. He slept fitfully that night, arriving at school the next morning with subtly-swollen flesh-ringed eyes.

The chasings continued, but started to peter out, until they stopped altogether. Bogo knew that, even though he had not managed to save the angelic Princess Dodonne, and without the assistance of the Frost Wizard Sam and Leonard the Thief, he had completed his campaign on The Isle of Desolation. Perhaps the Princess was still locked in the Tower of Trummle, but Bogo had fought enough.

For the first time in ages, an unshielded Roland the Stout slept incomparably well that night.