

STEAMY AND HOT

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Introduction

Author's note

Some of you may have read "The second tale of Bannog and Ariciel", which you should be able to find where you found this. In the chapter named "Good things come in small packages", Ariciel meets the Steambender family: Father Griggin, mother Lenna, their two children Nix the Rogue and Trixie the pink-haired Warrior, and their adopted daughter Bieslook (who is incidentally the only person to be found in-game except for the NPCs). I thought they deserved their own story, and this is it. Bieslook, by the way, is pronounced "Bees' Loak". It's Dutch for Chives. She does not have green hair as yet.

This story starts somewhere before the Burning Legion made a bother of themselves, and continues on till a few months before the Zombie Plague hits Stormwind.

Since this is the World of Warcraft, there will be graphic descriptions of violence. There's also implied sex, for those of you who like their sex implied, though I do keep civil. There will be adult themes. There will be hot chocolate and biscuits. There will be serious injury or death.

This is a work of fan fiction, and as such, it is derived from the World of Warcraft universe created by Blizzard Entertainment. I acknowledge all their trademarks and creations, without which I would have had to create my own setting and would never have had the audience I now enjoy.

These stories are based on what I can see in the game, and look up on WoWWiki. I don't own any of the books. I also tend to throw out bits of Lore I don't like.

File GSB-001: Testing and Nomenclature

Griggin crossed his arms, and watched the Examiner as he walked round his master piece. Like many master pieces, it had absolutely no practical application at all. It was a toy, a game. A vehicle for demonstrating one's skills. Griggin knew how good he was, so he had nothing to fear from this examination. He knew that all the connections were solid. He knew that each and every small pipe went exactly where it was supposed to go. The algorithms were well known, and the machine would either draw or win, never lose. Also, Griggin had stared down Voidwalkers, Felguards, Succubi. A mere Gnomish Examiner held no fear for him.

His knuckles were white.

"So, Journeyman Griggin, how does this work then?"

"The machine has been designed to respond in the appropriate way to any move the user may make, Sir. The patterns are evaluated by a steam-based assessment unit which will pass the correct decision on to the main game board."

"I mean which valve do I press?"

Griggin tried to swallow nothing.

"The one in the middle, Sir."

The Examiner pressed the valve Griggin had indicated. The machine huffed and puffed, and on the main board, the middle square turned, showing a large X. It took the machine only ten rotations. The top left square turned, showing an O.

"Hmm... Interesting."

The Examiner pressed the valve on the middle right. Almost immediately, the machine turned the middle left square to O.

"Hah. Think you can win that easily?"

No, thought Griggin. It's going to be a draw. The Examiner pressed the lower left valve. The machine showed the move, then turned the upper right square to O. The Examiner's hand hovered over the top middle valve. Then, he gave Griggin a look and pressed the lower middle valve. The machine turned the top middle square to O. Three Os in a row showed. The machine rotated the three squares at the top three times, then blew a whistle. The examiner chuckled.

"My my, Mericet Sparkbolt, Grand Master Engineer, outwitted by a machine! It seems to work, Journeyman Griggin. The action feels nice and solid. I wonder. What would happen if I try to cheat?"

Griggin's eyebrows raised.

"Cheat, Sir?"

"Yes."

After its little victory dance, the machine was now showing a new game, with an X in the top left corner. Examiner Sparkbolt pressed the top left valve. The whistle blew. He pressed the valve again. Again, the whistle blew, With a child-like grin, Mericet Sparkbolt pressed the top left valve again. The machine blew its whistle again, then turned all the squares to O. Sparkbolt frowned.

"What's it doing, Journeyman?"

"Sulking, Sir," said Griggin.

Sparkbolt looked at Griggin for a few moments. Then he burst out laughing.

"Well done, Journeyman, well done."

"Thank you, Sir."

Griggin dared to relax a little bit. Sparkbolt turned round, and with both hands pressed as many valves at

the same time as he could. Griggin's jaw dropped, and he turned pale. Luckily, the machine was still in sulk mode, so nothing happened. Sparkbolt turned round to Griggin with a wicked grin on his cheeks.

"Has my reputation preceded me, Journeyman Griggin?"

Griggin looked at the other Gnome's ear.

"You hold the record for breaking people's masterpieces simply by operating the controls."

"Are you scared yet?"

Griggin gave Sparkbolt a defiant little smile.

"I requested you, Sir."

Griggin slowly walked back to his apartment, and pulled out his keys. For some reason, the key didn't seem to fit. He bent over and looked at the key-hole. Ah. Someone had stuck a few bits of wire in, in an apparent attempt to open the door. A clear case of attempted breaking and leaving. Griggin sighed and produced a pencil from his pocket. He poked at the bit of wire till it fell out, and he could unlock his front door. From the kitchen, he could hear the sound of super-heated steam, and of singing. The smell of

stewed boar reached him. With a happy smile, he took off his coat and put it on the peg. Griggin walked to the middle of the room and took a deep breath.

"Family meeting!"

Griggin's wife Lenna came out of the kitchen, carrying a small girl on her arm. There was a noise behind the sofa, and a young boy emerged.

"Did you see me, Dad?"

"No Nix, but if you get bored picking a lock, it's not good policy to leave your lockpicks behind. Cover your tracks!"

"Yes, Dad."

Lenna smirked at Griggin.

"You're encouraging him in his burglary? He'll be clapped in irons and they'll put him in jail and throw away the key."

"Keys are for pussies," said Nix.

Lenna gave him a stern look.

"Now where did you hear that?"

"Nowhere, Mum."

"Well, Nix Brassmelter, wherever you did hear it, I don't want to hear it again."

Griggin raised a finger.

"You are wrong, my dear. Very wrong indeed. Not about the language, I quite agree with you there, but the young man you are addressing is *not* Nix Brassmelter anymore."

Lenna's eyes opened wide, and she took a deep breath.

"You *made* it!" She jumped at Griggin, little girl in her arm, and put her other arm round her husband's shoulders. "So... what are we called now?"

Griggin, one arm round his wife and daughter, the other on his son's shaggy head, allowed himself one smug grin.

"Lenna, my love, dear children, from today till you two find your talents and your own names, we will be known as..." He looked at his wife, his son and his little daughter. "The Steambender family!"

Lenna raised an eyebrow.

"Steambender? Steam bends all by itself."

"Ahh," said Griggin, "But the difficult bit is getting it to bend the way you want. Well? Do you like it?"

"Lenna Steambender," said Lenna. "Nix Steambender. Trixie Steambender." She looked into Griggin's eyes. "Master Engineer Griggin Steambender."

I can live with that."

"Good," said Griggin. "Now all I have to do is to go to Town Hall, and sign, oh, a mere two-hundred and seventy two forms. I expect I'll be back in a week or so."

Lenna gently put down Trixie on the floor, wrapped her arms round Griggin and kissed him.

"Congratulations, dear," she said.

"Ewww!" said Nix.

Lenna bent down to him and grabbed his ear. A wicked grin was on her face.

"A word of advice, sweetheart. Don't try to break into our bedroom tonight."

Nix turned pale. "Aww... *mum!*"

Griggin sat on a stool, in one of the underground caverns of Gnomeregan that the general population did not get into. A stone circle was set into its floor, and within it, green runes shimmered. He was watching a young girl try to summon an Imp. To do so, you had to chant out its name, correctly, from the first syllable to the last. Of course, with the shape of Gnome lips being what they were compared to Imps', it was impossible to

pronounce correctly, but you had to hear the name correctly in your head as you spoke it. Put in the effort. The girl choked, and the runes faded.

"Take a few deep breaths," said Griggin, "Then try again."

"Why are you making me do this? I don't have to do it this way outside, do I? I can use a soul shard."

"Certainly. All you have to do to get one is to kill another living creature, and rip off a piece of its immortal soul."

"Surely we keep a store of them? You have a few, I know. I could borrow one of yours."

"Use one of mine?" Griggin raised an eyebrow. "Were you paying attention when they explained it to you? They are soul-bound. From your victim to you. Anyway, once you get its name firmly in your mind, it is actually easier to do it without, for an Imp."

The girl scowled.

"Faztik is not making it easier, either. I can hear him swearing at me in my head when I try."

Griggin chuckled. "Why would Faztik make it easy for you? It's bound to you. If it can keep you from summoning it, then it'll be free till the day you die."

"I thought he liked me." The girl looked at Griggin's expression, and added, "Till you explained it to me."

Griggin's eyes bored into those of the young Warlock. "Demons do not 'like' anyone. They will be nice to you, and call you all kinds of endearing names, fawn over you, get very jealous of anyone you like, but they don't like you. They are not even capable of liking you. Even little Faztik will kill you if it can."

"Oh I *know*. You explained it to me. You keep explaining to me. I got it."

"There's a very good reason why we keep hammering at it the way we do. You will soon be able to summon more powerful demons. Voidwalkers. Succubi. Fel guards. A Succubus will try to seduce you, eat away at your resolve. Make you fall in love, and when that happens, you will be lost.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a *girl*. What do you think I am, a bumper?"

"You are assuming that a Succubus is a woman," said Griggin. "Succubi are creatures of passion. If they catch you unawares, you will desire 'her', long to touch her. That skin will seem to you like the most desirable thing to feel under your hand. And when you do... you will know it's the best thing you ever felt, and you will

want to touch her again, and again. Finally, you will become *her* pet, unable to resist. And at that point, you will know that demons *are* capable of hate. She will slowly strip the skin off your body, inch by inch, and still you will desire her. She can keep you alive, and suffering, for years if she wants. And she will want, because while she tortures you, technically belongs to you, we will not be allowed to separate her from you."

"Hold on. If you see someone being beaten to death by a demon, even if it's her own, you'll stop it, won't you?"

"No," said Griggin. "No, we will not lift a finger to help you. That is part of the agreement."

The girl looked at Griggin's face to see if he was lying. She saw no sign. He wasn't.

"In the old days," said Griggin, "We used to summon demons, do with them what we would, and dismiss them like you might put away a tool. And then, a Warlock died without dismissing his demon. It went berserk. Killed everyone in town, man, woman or child. It took a group of ten Warlocks to get it under control. Then, the Warlock Masters summoned a demon-lord, and drew up the Covenant with him. They drew up the rules. You've been told of the Rules, don't you?"

"Do not summon them unnecessarily," said the girl. "Treat them with respect. Above all, do not touch them without permission."

"Those are only the safeguard rules. There are many more, and many more detailed ones. Stick to the top three, and you have a good chance of living to learn the rest."

"Pah. I'm wondering if it's all worth the trouble. Maybe I can become a Mage instead."

"You can't," said Griggin. "Once you are able to summon the Imp Faztik, you will be safe. Not before. You *must* learn this."

"Huh. Or else?"

"If you do not learn to control even an Imp, then you will, at some point, run afoul of one of the rules of the Covenant. And when that happens, you will die."

The girl looked at Griggin, nervously.

"Huh. Demons would come out to drag me into the Twisting Nether?"

Griggin's brown eyes settled on the girl's face.

"No. I would kill you. And you would thank me for it. Now, when you're rested, try again."

"No!"

"You don't want your drink? It's strawberry. Lovingly synthesised strawberry to match your tastes." Lenna shook the sippy cup in front of her little daughter, then gave it to her. Trixie threw it across the room, and it bounced off the wall. Luckily, this was a Steambender Original Designed cup, and it didn't spill a drop. Lenna glowered at her young daughter.

"Trixie, *no!* We do not throw food and drink!"

Trixie wailed defiance, and almost squirmed out of her mother's arms. Lenna grabbed her by an arm and a leg and plonked her back in the play pen. She picked up the cup, and held it in front of Trixie's face. She slapped the cup out of Lenna's hand, and it bounced onto the floor and rolled away. Lenna scowled, pointed her hand at the cup and let fly. A small, white-hot ball of burning plasma shot at the cup, which jumped up and shot water vapour all over the place.

"Then have it your way. No drink for you."

Trixie stared at the remains of her sippy cup. Then, she giggled.

"Woosh! Bang! More!"

Lenna closed her eyes, trying to keep a stern face. Useless. She shook her head, and ruffled the brown

hair of her little whirlwind of a daughter.

"Trixie Steambender, you're a handfull."

She looked at the clock, wondering what was keeping Griggin. He wasn't usually late for dinner. Her smile faded. On the occasions he was late, there was usually a good reason.

"Oh my... Is that what I *think* it is?"

The merchant grinned broadly at Griggin, seeing the clear sign of a Good Customer in the making.

"It certainly is. This is the Piggelmee DE2000 coffee maker. I got it from a mate who didn't know what he was giving away. It's always nice to meet a fellow enthusiast. Can't sell these things anymore you know."

"Oh I don't believe that," said Griggin. His eyes roamed greedily over the lush curves, the tiny nipples, the gleaming chrome, the pressure gauges, integrated steam-powered grinding unit.

"Believe it," said the merchant. "They've got the twenty-four hundred now. They're going like hot cakes. It takes a real craftsman to spot a beauty like this."

"DE2400?" Griggin sneered. "They let a *dwarf* design that. It's got a *milk* frother, for crying out loud!"

"Yeah. I know. Bastards. And still, everybody leaps at them like they're the best thing since the double-action membrane pump." He sighed. "If I can't sell this soon, it may have to go on the scrap heap. Break my heart, it does, but what can you do?"

Griggin reached for his wallet, and spoke the magic words.

"What do you want for it?"

Lenna stared. She closed her eyes, and opened them. The Thing was still there. A chrome-tentacled, shining... apparatus that looked like a mad scientist's doomsday device.

"What by the name of the Titans is *that*?"

Griggin grinned at her happily.

"This, my love, is the ultimate in coffee making equipment the world over! There is no finer machine in the whole of Gnomeregan or outside. Just wait till I get this baby hooked up!"

"How much?"

"Well, one of the mains steam connections will do. I'll temporarily disconnect the washing machine while I try this out."

"Griggin Steambender. How much did you pay for this?"

"Don't worry, I'll put in another connection, but I don't want to bring the whole system down just for a test."

"Don't you like the coffee I make?"

Something in the back of Griggin's mind detached itself, and gave the rest of his brain a good hard kick up the backside to make it pay attention. He looked at Lenna. She did Not Look Happy. Griggin blinked.

"Could you repeat the question?"

"How much did the person you bought this from take you for?"

Griggin swallowed.

"Only fifteen gold, dear."

Lenna said nothing.

"These things used to go for at least twice that! You usually see them only in taverns! It can output thirty cups per minute! Customised to everybody's taste!"

"*Fifteen* gold?"

Griggin looked at his feet.

"yes."

"Do you know how much I saved buying potatoes in bulk? Stretching out my trips to the hairdresser?"

Walking for miles getting the cheapest food?"

Griggin opened his mouth, and closed it again.

"Twenty gold. Since we got into this house. Three years ago."

Lenna took a deep breath.

"We don't *need* this thing! Look! There's a perfectly good coffee jug on the counter! I love making coffee for you. You never complained. So what in Azeroth possessed you to blow three years' savings on that freakish contraption, I don't know, but you're taking it back!"

"The merchant has left town for Ironforge," said Griggin. "Anyway, this thing saves on coffee beans used, works quicker, and serves one cup per helping, so no more throwing away half-empty jugs of coffee. It'll earn itself back!"

Lenna's hands glowed.

"How long will that take?"

Griggin's lips moved, considering. Fifty percent increase in efficiency, steam usage, possibly increased usage the first few weeks...

"About twenty years, dear."

Lenna said nothing, and said it very loudly.

Griggin bowed his head.

"I'm sorry my love."

"I feel a new family rule coming up," said Lenna.

"Purchases above five gold to be done with at least two Steambenders present."

"Adult Steambenders," said Griggin.

"How many of those do we have? We'd never buy anything."

"Yes, dear."

With trembling hands, Griggin put the cup down in front of Lenna. She looked at her husband. A small wisp of steam came from the cup, spiralling its way to the ceiling. She smiled.

"Thank you dear."

She sat back in her chair and picked up her knitting.

"Aren't you going to taste it?"

"In a bit, dear."

Griggin nodded.

"The steam net will be down for maybe thirty minutes in an hour's time while I fit another few outlets in the kitchen."

"Another few dear?"

"Just in case we want to move some equipment in the future."

"Enjoy, dear."

Griggin sighed, and turned round to the things he was most comfortable with: pipes and machines. Even though both machines and wives had a tendency to blow up in your face when mishandled, with a machine, you could usually tell beforehand.

The little ball on the pressure gauge hadn't moved even a fraction of an inch in the last five minutes, which meant that the seals were tight. He was just about to disconnect it when there was a hand on his shoulder.

"It's lovely coffee, dear."

Griggin looked round at Lenna.

"I'm really sorry, dear. I promise I won't buy anything that expensive again without asking you."

Lenna laughed. "If Succubi knew to offer you something with high pressure steam pipes rather than an unobstructed view of their bodies. You'd be lost forever."

File GSB-024: Vocation

"I'm not sure about this." Lenna looked unhappily at her husband. "Aren't they thieves and murderers?"

Griggin put his hands behind his head, and looked at the bedroom ceiling. A small frown was on his face.

"They certainly are. The only people less popular are Warlocks. But like us, Rogues have their uses. I feel heavy weather coming up, my love. There was another Trogg attack last week. The third this month. And they were too easy to beat off. They're planning something. I want us all to be able to defend ourselves. Nix is a natural at stealth and subterfuge. When aimed at the right target, those are not intrinsically evil."

"Still... Sneaking about. Poisons. Lock-picking. If he learns to do all those things, won't he be tempted into a life of crime?"

"He's also shaping up to be an excellent engineer. I looked at his latest project. His design was the simplest in all his class."

"Simplest? Is that good?"

"Yes. Bad engineers make horribly complicated devices. More sprockets and cogwheels. More things to go bing. Nix' walker was faster. Some of the others didn't even make it across the room." Griggin radiated pride. "He has the gift. So I'm hoping that his main income will come from his technical accomplishments, and that he'll use his Rogue's skills to make sure nobody takes it away from him."

"Rather than the other way round?"

"Hah. Yes. Evil engineers have a tendency towards doomsday devices. It's the final stage before a small band of children brings them down."

"The Light forbid. Alright then, send him. But I'm keeping an eye on him. If stuff starts to disappear around him, it'll be fireballs at dawn."

"I'm more worried about Trixie. I've had word. She's been in another fight."

"What, again? Oh my."

"It's that temper of hers. We should have fitted a longer fuse, my dear."

"What was it this time?"

"Oh, I don't know. She hasn't told me. Could be a girl thing. Have a word with her?"

"I will," said Lenna. "She's not a bad girl."

"True," said Griggin, "But fellow students ending up with the school nurse might give people the wrong idea."

Lenna put a steaming mug of chocolate in front of Trixie, who was sitting at the kitchen table. A few biscuits were on a saucer next to it. Lenna sat down in front of Trixie.

"Right. Spill."

"Spill what? Nothing to spill."

"Someone beat himself up just to get you in trouble? Using your fists?"

Trixie stared into her mug and said nothing.

"Come on, dear. Don't make me shoot fireballs at you till you talk. Mana potions are terribly expensive."

Trixie snorted. Lenna put her hand on her long brown hair. Ye gods, the girl needed a haircut. Again.

"Come on. I can see you're not happy with something. Spit it out."

"He called me a warlock pet," said Trixie. "Without the tits."

Lenna breathed in, held, breathed out. Warlocks dealt with dark magic. Demonology. Affliction. Destruction. It was sometimes difficult to see what distinguished them from evil sorcerers. Griggin was the kindest person Lenna had ever met, and when she met him, a kind person was just what she needed. She'd married him without a shred of reservation, knowing he was a Warlock. But not everybody could see past the demons. Warlock's children were often bullied at school. Nix knew how to stay out of trouble, go with the flow, keep clean. Trixie was not the kind of girl who even considered that.

"I'm sorry, dear. But you really should keep your hands to yourself, even then. You know how strong you are. People could get hurt."

Trixie looked up, one eye glinting from under her long, bushy hair, saying without words that as far as she was concerned, Drongo and his cronies getting hurt wasn't a bad thing.

"They're just stupid, Trixie. They don't know the first thing about Warlocks, and they're scared of them. Don't let them get to you."

Lenna groaned at herself for saying it. She knew only too well how difficult it was. She shook her head and

put a hand on Trixie's shoulder.

"Try to stay away from them. Please?"

"I will, Mum."

Nix reached down from the top bunk bed, and poked his sister's shoulder. Trixie sniffed, looked up at him.

"What do you want?"

Nix dropped a few copper coins onto Trixie's pillow.

"Your lunch money. I got it back for you."

"They'll only nick it off me again tomorrow." Trixie said nothing for a few moments. "Thanks," she added.

Nix turned onto his back. "I wish you could just get out of their way, Sis. It's not like these guys'll ever win the All-Gnomeregan uptake speed awards."

"Easy for you to say. You can just sneak round them. I can't."

"Make an example of one of them, then. You're still holding back on them, aren't you?"

"Yeah. But I can't. All they do is grab me, nick my money and dump me in the cludgie. They haven't really hurt me."

Nix stuck his head over the edge of the bed.

"Like hell they haven't. I've seen the bruises, Trix. You're tougher than your average girlie girl. One of *those* would have been in hospital by now."

"So why don't *you* put your foot down, big brother?"

Nix took a deep breath. "Anything I can threaten them with, I can't follow up, and they know it. They'd get their dads to have me expelled, or even arrested. And you'd be back where you started."

"Only if you get caught."

"Riiight. I think the only way of not getting caught is to kill them. That's taking things a bit too far."

Trixie rolled onto her back, looking up at Nix in the bed above her.

"So what can you do?"

"Give me your money tomorrow, and I'll buy lunch. You can't go without, Sis."

"Thanks," said Trixie.

"Well, well. If it isn't our little Succubus. You know the drill titless. Out with the money."

"Don't have any."

"Oh come on. Do you really want to do this the hard way? Not that I mind, but my friends get awful tired

kicking your butt."

"Stuff you. I didn't bring any money. What's the point? You'd just nick it off me."

"Oh gods... Trying to be clever are you? Alright then. Get her lads."

Even before she tried, she knew it was useless, but still, Trixie ran. They caught up with her before she'd taken three steps and the three of them dragged her into the toilets. She was thrown face first onto the floor. Hands were thrust into her pockets. Her school bag was turned over. No money was found.

"Right titless. Where is it?"

"Like I said, I don't have any."

One of Drongo's little helpers grinned. "What's the bet she's got it in her bra?"

Drongo laughed. "Bra? She don't need any. Let me show you. It'll teach her not to try and be smart."

Trixie was turned onto her back, and Drongo ripped open her blouse.

"Well what do you know? The little warlock girl has one anyway. Let's see how much money she's got in there!"

Trixie screamed and heaved for all she was worth. Drongo was thrown back. Trixie's legs moved with predatory speed, and she planted her sturdy leather boots squarely in the faces of the two boys holding her arms. They let go and Trixie jumped to her feet. With a growl, she ran for the door.

"Don't let her get away!" Drongo scrambled to his feet, and made to run after Trixie. Trixie kicked the door to, and turned her back towards it. She put her hand to her lip, and looked at the blood on it. Her eyes glinted at the boys from under her tousled hair.

"Who's first, bitches?"

Griggin was sitting in one of the chairs opposite the Head Master's desk. His face was completely expressionless, a good habit to pick up if you have to stare down demons.

"I'm afraid we cannot tolerate this. Young Drongo Cogspark has three broken ribs. Grog Macehandle has lost two teeth, and Durn Fizzbottle's arm was dislocated. Do you expect me to simply let this pass? Your daughter has been in many fights, and I feel she must be taught a lesson."

"My daughter informed me that the boys you mention made a regular habit of offering her violence, and stealing her lunch money. My wife has seen..."

Griggin's expression betrayed nothing as he looked into the Head Master's eyes. "Physical evidence of this."

"Trixie is a violent girl, Mr. Steambender. Hardly a day goes by when she is not involved in some kind of disturbance. I have heard these tales before, and I find it hard to give credence to them."

Griggin sat completely still on the hard wooden chair. His fingers were steeped together in front of his stomach. Cogspark. Macehandle. Fizzbottle. He knew the names. They lived in the upper levels of Gnomeregan, and made regular donations to the school. Expelling three healthy young innocent boys might well prove disastrous for the school's balance sheets.

"I have made some discreet enquiries with other parents. They inform me that Trixie is not the only victim of these boys' predations. My son Nix has confirmed this as well. I feel I must disagree with your assessment of the situation."

"Then I will simply agree to disagree with you. My judgement stands, Mr. Steambender. As does the

punishment. Twenty strokes of the cane. It will teach her not to attack my students."

"Your students made it a regular habit to attack my daughter, Head Master. You now wish to punish my daughter because this time, she won?"

"Three young boys had to be hospitalised, Mr. Steambender, as a direct result of your daughter's actions. I feel that she gets off lightly with a caning. I have refrained from involving the authorities to avoid... unpleasantness."

"I understand that, Head Master," said Griggin. "Because I think that the major part of the unpleasantness would not land on my daughter's head, but rather on yours, for allowing a criminal gang to exist within your school."

"Conjecture and hearsay, Mr. Steambender. No crimes are being committed within these walls."

Trixie, who had been looking at her feet, snapped up her head.

"Like hell there isn't. Drongo and his little helpers have been nicking everybody's money. High time somebody told them not to."

"Quiet, Trixie," said Griggin.

"As you can see, Mr. Steambender, Trixie has serious problems accepting authority. Twenty strokes will put her on the right path."

"Trixie has never shown any problems accepting my authority, Head Master. Not because of fear of punishment, but because she knows that I will treat her fairly in any situation."

"Are you implying that my treatment of her is not fair? We cannot allow violence and disobedience to run rampant in the school. Twenty strokes of the cane, Mr. Steambender. As a token of good will, I will allow her to keep on her underwear."

Griggin said nothing for a few moments. He looked at Trixie. She was angry. She had a right to be, but she was not on her own territory. He looked back at the Head Master.

"Give us a moment," he said. He got up from his chair, and led Trixie a few steps away. He put his hands on her shoulders, looked into her eyes.

"Trixie, I cannot reason with this man. He knows he is in the wrong, and can only worm his way out by blaming you. Are you afraid?"

Trixie's eyes wandered to Head Master's desk.

"Look at me, Trixie. Could you take twenty-one strokes?"

"Twenty-one?"

"Yes. I have a plan. I will interrupt the... procedure at some point. At that point, count the same number twice. Leave the rest to me. By the Light, I am not a vindictive person, but he will not get away with this."

"I'm not scared. I've had worse. Getting even sounds good to me."

Griggin stood up, facing the Head Master.

"Very well then. Twenty strokes and no more. Whereupon I will remove my daughter, and my son, from this school."

The Head Master gave a little laugh.

"I knew you'd see sense. I will make an appointment with your daughter."

"No," said Griggin. "The punishment will be carried out here and now. I will witness it."

"As you wish."

The Head Master took out a half-dozen canes, and made Trixie choose one. She pointed at one. Then, she was made to bend over the back of a chair, lift up her

skirt and call out the numbers. Her voice was steady as each of the strokes fell. The only sign Griggin could see was that her knuckles were white gripping the chair.

"Fifteen."

"Trixie," said Griggin, "Don't break the chair."

Trixie looked round, swallowed.

"Yes, Dad."

The Head Master frowned.

"No more interruptions please, Mr. Steambender."

The cane swished again.

"Fifteen."

As a Warlock, it was not a survival trait to let your emotions show in your body language. Griggin did not move or speak until Trixie reached twenty. The Head Master's offer to let Trixie keep on her underwear was of no value whatsoever. All his strokes landed on the bare skin of her thighs. Griggin also noticed that the cane he was using was not the one Trixie had pointed out. It was thinner. Griggin could see no blood, but each stroke of the cane resonated in his mind.

"Twenty."

Trixie knew better than to stand up immediately.

"You may get up, and cover yourself," said the Head Master.

Trixie did as she was told. Griggin took an envelope from his inside pocket. He opened it and put the papers on the Head Master's desk.

"I have made all the necessary preparations to remove my children from your school. All that remains is for you to sign."

"And why would I do that? You have signed both of your children up for the whole year. I see no reason to grant your wishes. My work is important to me, Mr. Steambender. Moulding the citizens of the future."

Griggin stood up, and walked to the front of the desk.

"Mr. Head Master, you are a disgrace to the profession. You know full well that my daughter is the victim of the thieves you allow to run through the general populace unchecked, for fear that their parents might stop their donations. I have seen the petty cruelties you have visited upon my daughter. And you have over-stepped your authority."

"What do you mean?"

"The punishment set was twenty strokes of the cane. You administered twenty-one. You have therefore struck my daughter without cause."

"She counted out the strokes herself."

"As a Warlock Master, I have witnessed the tortures inflicted upon those who mis-handle demons, Mr. Head Master. I can count. So can you. I can understand, in the circumstance, why my daughter might be mistaken. You might have corrected her, yet you chose not to do so. You chose to use a cane with a sharper sting than the one my daughter chose. I can only explain your excess zeal as wilful and wanton. Revenge for my daughter's endangering your over-inflated income."

"Well, I will subtract it next time. And from experience, I can see that that will not be long in coming."

Griggin cast upon himself a spell called Shadow Ward. It protected him from evil spells used by sorcerors of the Horde, or rogue demons. It also made his skin glow purple.

"Do you think I will let my daughter be mistreated in this manner? You have punished her for crimes she has *yet to commit*. Under no jurisdiction would this be allowed. I hereby sentence you to the same punishment you have inflicted on my daughter. Twenty strokes of a cane of your own choosing."

"I will not submit to such threats. I will *not* choose any cane."

"That is at your option. In that case, my assistant will use her own equipment to mete out punishment. I will begin the summoning."

"Do you think you'll get away with it? I'll have you arrested, thrown out of the city."

Griggin cackled. "And what will you tell them? That a Warlock of the Nether Circle summoned a Succubus in your very office? You'll be locked up in a lunatic asylum. A Succubus can punish you in ways so subtle that they leave no marks on the skin, only the memory of pain. There would be no evidence. Nothing to indicate the agony you experienced here, in this room."

Griggin bent forward.

"Or, you can sign the documents."

Griggin, his arm round Trixie's shoulders, walked through one of the long halls to his home. In his pocket were the signed documents. You can do more with a kind word and a sharp stick than you can with just a kind word. Just before he opened the door, he pulled Trixie to him and hugged her.

"Trixie, I am so sorry you had to go through all that. You were very brave, and you did *not* deserve it. Tomorrow we start looking for a new school."

Trixie blew a few locks of brown hair out of her eyes, and grinned.

"Oh it was worth it, just to see Old Plank squirm. Would you really have set a Succubus on him?"

"No. You only summon a Succubus for actual combat, if you know what's good for you. Good thing I didn't need to, eh?"

"Dad, you were *scary*. Never knew you had it in you."

"Come on," said Griggin. "Let's get you some ointment."

Trixie, freshly anointed and bandaged, sat at the table, on a pillow, clutching a mug of hot chocolate.

"And then, Dad went all shadowy and Old Plank shit himself. He couldn't sign the forms fast enough."

"Language, Trixie," said Lenna.

"*Pooed* himself," said Trixie.

"Better, but not much better."

Lenna stood up, declared that it was night time and pushed the children off to bed. Griggin sighed as he

followed Lenna to bed.

"So," said Lenna. "What really happened?"

Griggin sighed. "More or less what we told you. Nasty, incompetent, vindictive little man. I'm glad I got Trixie and Nix out."

"Aren't you going to get in trouble for this?"

"I spoke with Mrs. Greasebolt. She may be ready to come forward. When she does, School Management will be in so much trouble that they'll hardly have the time to conduct a vendetta against me." Griggin grinned. "And they have nothing on me. All I did was talk. Poor Trixie was the only one who got hurt. We may have to do chocolate on demand for a few more weeks. With biscuits."

Lenna turned over in bed and looked at the wall.

"If nothing worse happens to her in her life than what she went through today, I will be very happy. She's destined for fighting. I can feel it."

"Well," said Griggin, "If that's the case, then she had better get good at it."

Trixie walked along next to Griggin.

"So. This school," she said. "Do you know what it's like?"

"Tough," said Griggin. "The toughest school you can imagine would be a paradise compared to it."

"Pah."

"I've heard tales of students beating each other up. Lots of weapons there, too. Better look sharp."

"Better than back with Old Plank."

"Little chance of that," said Griggin. "After Mrs. Greasebolt sued, lots of other victims came forward. Mr. Plank is no longer Head Master. There's even word of him facing charges."

"Hope they set the *lawyers* on him," said Trixie.

"Lawyers are scared of the pupils in this school," said Griggin. "Ah. Here we are."

Trixie looked up at the name of the school. Her jaw dropped.

"Gnomeregan *Military* School?"

"Yes. I think you will feel right at home there."

Trixie glowed. A big, big grin was on her face.

"How long do you have to be there before they give you a sword?"

File GSB-030: Opportunity

Nix was sitting at the kitchen table, bent over one of his blueprints, when there was a noise at the door. He stood up, walked quietly to the other side of the room and hid himself like he'd been taught by Fenthwick, his trainer. His father recognised this as the necessary practice it was, but it drove his mother up the walls sometimes. He was getting better and better at it. The singed eyebrows were merely an incentive to do better next time.

The door opened and in the opening stood... Oh my. The face was still the same. The chain armour, he'd seen before. Standard Gnomeregan Military School issue. What was different... Nix sneaked behind his sister. He poked her in the back with a finger.

"What in the name of the Titans have you done to your hair?"

Trixie squealed, whirled round and punched the space where Nix was just a moment ago. Nix was in the middle of the room, grinning at her. She snarled.

"You're lucky they make you give back your swords when you go home, Nix Steambender."

"Trix! You're... cute!"

"Huh?"

"Your hair. Normally, blue eyes and pink clash like mad, but on you, it looks cute!"

Trixie crouched down, frowned at her brother and charged. Nix dodged her.

"People are going to ask me, who's that cute girl? And I'll say that's my cute sister. I can tell you where she lives."

"I'll cute *you*," said Trixie. She ran at Nix again, and this time managed to grab his hand. She pulled hard, and sent him sprawling. Fast as a cat, Trixie leapt on Nix' back, grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

"Say you're sorry," said Trixie. "Or else."

"I'm sorry you're cute," said Nix. "Aaaaah!"

"Not good enough, Like you mean it!"

"Stuff you," said Nix. He twisted underneath his sister, sent her off headfirst into the sofa and vanished. Trixie leapt to her feet, and looked round, pig-tails flapping as she turned her head. Nix appeared out of nowhere behind her, flicked one of them up and vanished again.

The kitchen door opened, and Lenna appeared.

"O hi sweetheart," she said. "Love the hair. It's cute."

Trixie glared at her, then looked round the room again. "Nix! You bastard! Come out so I can get you!"

"Ahem," said Lenna. "You know what a bastard is, don't you dear? Are you accusing me of sleeping outside?"

Trixie's eyes opened wide, and she took a quick breath. "No! No mum! I was just using the word in the sense of nasty little *git*."

"I'm afraid that's just par for the course for bigger brothers dear. I suggest you fall over very gently, then yell blue murder accusing him. I'll ground him for a week."

"Aww Mum," said Nix. He appeared by the table.

Trixie didn't hesitate for a moment, took a running leap and planted two boots in Nix' stomach. Nix turned pale and fell over.

"He *pushed* me," said Trixie.

"Don't do that, Nix," said Lenna. "Now stop playing. Dinner's almost ready."

"Aww. Beans and bacon again?"

"Tomorrow, for some variety, I'll try some beans *without* bacon," said Lenna. "Pork bits are getting more expensive by the minute. Now be quiet and set the table."

Griggin watched his family eat. It was one of the few things that could cheer him up these days. Times were hard. He knew quite well how good an engineer he was, but lately, the jobs had stopped coming his way. He could just about scrape by on his regulars and the small stipend he received from the Warlock circle, but if something in the house would go expensively wrong, then he'd be in trouble. He had a feeling he knew why, too. He'd annoyed a few of the most influential families. They disliked him for stirring up all that fuss over a little youthful exuberance involving his daughter. So the commissions went elsewhere.

Griggin sighed, ate another spoonful of beans. He looked round his house. All that he could see, he had made himself. The sofa, sturdy and amazingly comfortable, and heated from the main steam generator. This table and the chairs. They were beautiful, but home-made. He wouldn't get the scrap value if he had to sell them. Nix had made the clock, as

a school project. He was really good with small mechanisms. He looked at Trixie, pink pig-tails and all. She was happily talking to Lenna. Good. That made it all worth it.

Meanwhile, the Trogg situation was not improving. As he'd suspected, the attacks had been trials, to find out where Gnomish defences were weakest. Of late, there'd been more severe attacks, and even High Tinker Mekkatorque was worried, by all accounts. Griggin had taken part in the fighting. He sneered to himself. He used an imp for extra firepower, which tended to surprise the less experienced warriors, who would think it was an enemy and attack it until Griggin yelled at them not to. Sometimes, they'd just growl at him and keep attacking. He sighed. Sometimes he wondered if it was all worth it, but he had obligations here. He couldn't just up sticks and leave. It was never good to relocate children from one school to the other.

Lenna's hand was on his arm.

"Are you alright dear? Your dinner is getting cold."

Griggin shook himself.

"Sorry love. Thinking."

"At the table," said Lenna.

Griggin laughed. "In violation of rule twelve. No dessert for me!"

"Dibs," said Trixie, just before Nix could.

"Go on," said Griggin. "Feed the wolves."

Trixie picked up the knife. It hovered over the piece of cake, then came down. Nix saw that one piece was at least twenty molecules larger than the other and picked that. Trixie scowled. Within seconds, both pieces were mere memory.

They cleared the table and washed up, then pulled out a very complicated board game and started playing. Nix rolled the dice. "Right. Stations are purple, and the escalators are up. We're playing normal house rules, right?"

"Except no shunting in the first three turns," said Trixie, "Because that always means I get to bring everybody else coffee while I wait till I get a turn.

"Don't start at the Knight's Bridge, then," said Nix.

"I *like* starting there. If I'm lucky, I can get to MC in five."

"That's *why* we keep shunting you."

"I'm *sure* that normal rules don't allow shunting that early in the game."

"Well if *someone* hadn't puked all over the rulebook, I could show you."

Griggin sighed. "I tried getting a replacement, but Stovold's guide is out of print."

Lenna knocked her knuckles on the table.

"Are we playing, or are we bickering over the rules? I'm starting. Earl's court."

"Hammersmith," said Griggin, moving his piece.

"Knight's bridge," said Trixie, and stuck out her tongue at Nix.

"Green Park," said Nix. "Guess what Sis?"

"On the *first* bloody move?"

"Extra strong, dear," said Lenna. "No sugar."

Trixie scowled, and stomped off to the coffee machine.

Griggin looked round the table. You could tell a lot about people's character by the way they played this game. Nix, for instance, used every dirty trick that used to be in the book before Trixie was sick on it, even if it didn't advance him any. Trixie, for her part, used simple and straightforward moves that would move her round the board quickly, but leave her wide open to the others' tricks. Lenna would start by holding back a little,

and then, after building up her reserves, come out with big bold moves that could knock people all over the board, but would then leave her open to the attacks of the others. Griggin himself liked to go slow and steady, paying proper attention to defence, so he could fight off most attacks as he neared the goal. As he watched, an argument over the rules developed between Lenna and Nix. These tended to go on for a while.

Griggin looked out of the window. Tomorrow, he had a meeting with Mr. Greasefinger. It would be nice to have a little gold come in. Nix needed reagents, Trixie needed a new helm. Lenna was studiously mending her robes, but by now, the things were more stitches than proper cloth.

"Your turn, dear."

"Hm?" Griggin looked up. "Oh. Ah. Old Street."

"Hah!" Trixie's hand shot out. "I use two buskers, leap you, walk across King's cross, escalators up to avoid the penalty... Mornington Crescent!"

"*Dad!* That's just what she was waiting for."

"Oh. Yes," said Griggin. "That was inattentive of me. Well done Trixie." He sighed, finished his coffee. "Well, I think it's time to turn in. Busy day tomorrow."

"Sorry mate, I was going to tell you this before, but my whole company has been bought out by Macehandle. They have their own maintenance crews, so the first thing they did was get rid of the current contractors. Bloody bastards are already making a mess of things, but I'm no longer in charge."

Griggin could only stare. Wilkin Greasefinger's sausage factory used miles of piping to transport heat, water, frying fat and other things better left unmentioned, all over the plant. It had been one of his large jobs, and keeping the pipes in repair had been one of Griggin's steady money makers.

"Are you staying on?"

Greasefinger looked round the place. He'd built this factory mostly with his own hands, assisted now and then by other craftsmen like Griggin. He sighed.

"They want me to, though I'll have a second who'll be watching me run it. I've got a good mind to tell them to stuff it. Can't afford to, though."

"You are telling me," said Griggin. "I was counting on this job. Well, I can see it's out of your hands. Thank you very much for all the work."

Griggin turned round, and walked out of the office. He wandered about the estate, not quite knowing what

to do. As it was, he was barely staying afloat. He was not in any debt, but children were expensive.

Economising on their education was too bad even to consider.

A few yards further on, there was a small workshop, squeezed in between a warehouse and an office building. The front gate was open, and someone was experimenting with a machine. It had that "prototype" look about it: makeshift pipes, no engine covers. This was wild technology, untamed, feral, not quite fully understood yet, and dangerous. A Gnome was observing an impressive array of pressure gauges, completely unaware of the fact that one of the pipes had started glowing ominously. Griggin's eyes scanned the piping, looking for an emergency shutoff. Ah! He jumped forward, and pulled a chain. An enormous cloud of steam blew out of three of the exhausts, and the machine became quiet. The Gnome turned round to Griggin.

"What do *you* think you are doing?"

"Forgive me," said Griggin. "I was saving you from serious injury or death." He pointed at the pipe he'd noticed. "I thought that was a suspicious colour for a pipe."

The Gnome looked, and turned pale.

"By the Titans! That's the coolant, and by the looks of it the pipe has run dry." He pulled out a red handkerchief and wiped his brow. He held out his hand to Griggin. "Pardon me for snapping at you. This could have gotten ugly. Marvin Sprocket, at your service. People call me Doc."

"Griggin Steambender," said Griggin, shaking Marvin's hand. "Why wasn't anyone watching your back? And what is that machine you're working on?"

Marvin pointed a hand at his device.

"What you see before your eyes, my friend, is the Optimal Prime two hundred water pump and power source. Actually, this is the two-hundred X. Can't seem to get the bugs out."

"Power source?"

"Yep. This baby will keep a whole family in hot water forever! All you need to add is, well, water."

"It's a *perpetual motion machine*?"

"Exactly! Oh, don't look at me like that. I know that a true perpetuum mobile is impossible."

"Hah. Perpetual motion machines are easy. All you need is a frictionless vacuum and a marble. Useful

ones, though..."

Marvin laughed. "Well, I know that. So I haggle a bit. If you can hand it over to your grand-children and it's still running, then that's perpetual enough for me. All thanks to these things."

He opened a box, and took out a glowing crystal. Griggin recoiled, but Marvin grinned broadly.

"Don't worry. This is just alpha-three radiation. Perfectly harmless, and still it'll power everything you want for years!"

"It also radiates in the visible spectrum," said Griggin. "Do be careful with that. You don't know where else."

"Yes I do. I've measured it. I'm not *that* mad. Well, um... not suicidally so." He considered again. "Not on purpose anyway. Ye gods, I miss my partner."

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing bad. Popped into the House for the Bewildered for a few months. It'll do him good."

"Ah. And then he'll be back?"

Marvin ran a hand through his beard. "Don't know. He may be looking for employment elsewhere. 'Next time I see you, I'll kill you,' is how he put it. Though I'm sure he didn't mean it, really. He's a wonderful chap.

Sad to see him go."

Griggin nodded thoughtfully, rubbing his chin.

"So," said Marvin, "What's your field? I can see you're an Engineer. You have the look about you."

"Steam technology, piping, maintenance, heat transport. If it runs through a pipe, I'll try my hand at it."

"Ah. Always nice to meet a fellow steampunk. Mad or sane?"

"Mostly sane, though you may want to ask my wife for a second opinion on that."

"Hmm. Family man. Nice. I could never get the hang of families. Have you ever worked in QA?"

"I do the occasional job for Greasefinger, or at least I did. If my replacements are as good as I think they are, we may see the very first sausage explosion in Gnomish history."

"Ahright. So if I understand correctly, you find yourself between jobs at the moment."

Griggin heaved a great sigh, looking over his shoulder at the sausage plant.

"I suppose I do. Greasefinger was my biggest customer."

Marvin gave Griggin a look.

"So why didn't they keep you on?"

"The whole company was taken over by the Macehandle Consortium. Old Mr. Macehandle does not like me. Something to do with an incident at school involving his son and my daughter."

"Oh damn. Pissed off the Macehandles, have you? That'll bugger up your luck. I've managed to stay away from them till now, and long may it continue."

Marvin looked at the Optimal Prime 200(X). Its pipes were gently clicking as they cooled. He nudged Griggin out, closed the door and turned round to Griggin.

"I owe you a pint, mate. If it wasn't for you, I might have blown up my prototype. Let's talk."

Lenna looked at Griggin, thoughtfully.

"A mad steampunk?"

"Yes. He's working on a water heater and pump powered by alpha-three particles, but he's struggling with the details. Actually, he's already done the difficult bit, which is getting alpha particles to heat water. Haven't the foggiest idea how, and he won't say, of course, but I've seen it work."

"And your job would be?"

"To keep him alive, basically, while he pushes his technology to the limit. He's horribly disorganised, and well, let's just say that details like basic safety have no power to distract him from the more important issues."

"Hm," said Lenna. "So you may end up splattered all over the workshop?"

"It would be my job to prevent that from happening."

Lenna sighed.

"Griggin Steambender, am I going to come home one day to find you with less than your current number of limbs? I rather like your limbs. This sounds dangerous."

"It is. I am aware of that. Marvin Sprocket isn't. Accidents happen when people don't realise how dangerous it is what they're doing. Also, he pays pretty well. If I can get this to work, then I won't have to scrape up all those little jobs that are infra dig for Cogspark."

Lenna put her arm round Griggin's shoulders and looked into his eyes. They smiled at each other.

"Go on then," said Lenna. "But if you blow yourself up, I'll never talk to you again."

"Right, Marvin. What have I told you? No testing without Steambender present."

"Oh come on. It worked! Power output is now at three thousand!"

"That is beside the point. The purpose of testing is to find out whether a device works, or not. So it works, but what would have happened if it hadn't? Shrapnel all over the shop, and I'd be looking for a job. And don't tell me that couldn't happen. I can see at least three dodgy joints from where I'm standing."

"Are you faulting my pipework?"

Griggin sneered, pointed.

"That's a two-point-two muff on a two inch pipe. What did you fill it up with? Chewing gum?"

"I didn't have a two point zero. What did you expect me to do?"

"Get one. You're not helping anyone by being impatient."

"Pah. Like I keep telling you, it doesn't work like that. When the spark hits you, you *have* to act. Wait, and the idea will be gone."

"And how do you tell the good ideas from the bad ones at the time?"

"You don't. That's where you come in. But you weren't there, so I got on with it." Sprocket grinned. "And now, we can fill up people's hot bath in two minutes!"

Griggin sighed. Unless he did something about this, he predicted a trip to the House for the Bewildered for himself in exactly twenty-three days. But what could he do? Marvin Sprocket lived in the space above his workshop. On a whim, he'd even constructed a sliding pole from his bedroom to the shop floor for when one of the wild ideas hit him and he had to trap it in metal and mechanisms before it got away. Once the idea was there, before him, in the flesh, how could he resist seeing if it worked?

Griggin walked up to the prototype. He winced as he looked at some of the joints. Some parts were already buckling under strain that they hadn't been meant to take. The thing would probably have torn itself apart in ten more minutes. Griggin's eyes scanned the contraption. A list of things to modify formed in his head. Steel pipes to be replaced with copper. Parts to be replaced with different ones. Conduits that could be routed differently, and away from hot parts. He stared at the wall for a few moments, then turned round to

Marvin.

"Mr. Sprocket, we are going to pay a little visit to the shop. Bring twelve gold, twenty silver."

Marvin stood behind Griggin, as he tightened the last nut. The Optimal Prime 200(X) had changed. Gone were the haphazardly routed steel pipes. All the parts matched. Where once the machine had looked like it was waiting for Marvin to turn round so it could hit more essential organs as it exploded, now it looked as if someone might actually allow it within a two-hundred yard range of their house. Griggin pushed the wrench back into the holder. Cleaning up Marvin's design had taken him maybe four hours. Griggin looked over his shoulder and grinned.

"There. Now how does that look?"

Marvin sneered.

"You've taken all the fun out of it. I suppose you'll want to test it now?"

Griggin nodded slowly. He pushed the machine behind the transparent blast shield, a new addition to the shop. He connected it to the water tank.

"Got any of those crystals handy?"

"Sure. Gimme a sec."

Marvin wandered off, rummaged through a few boxes and pulled out an energy crystal. He slotted it into the appropriate receptacle. With a buzz of clockwork, it was pulled inside and a hatch closed. Marvin chuckled.

"I was wondering what that whirring gizmo was there for. This is just showing off, Mr. Steambender. Now where's the on-switch?"

From behind the blast screen, Griggin held up a box, connected to the machine with a thick cable. Marvin's jaw dropped.

"Remote *control*? What in Azeroth is that good for?"

"It allows me to observe the machine in operation from behind the blast screen. Remember, the question of 'is it going to explode' has more than one answer."

"Ye gods, man. Have you no faith in your work at all?"

"None whatsoever," said Griggin happily. "Would you like to join me here?"

Marvin did, grumbling under his breath. Griggin pulled the chain that opened the water tap. Then, he pulled a lever on the control box. The Gnomes pushed

their faces against the glass to see.

"Hah!" said Griggin. He pointed, as he saw the needle of one of the pressure gauges rise.

"Twenty-five hundred," said Marvin. "I got it to three thousand, remember?"

"I know," said Griggin. "Let's have the thing heat up all the way through before I push it. If there's dodgy welds, I'd like to find out now, not when the thing is operating at full power."

"It's so *quiet*," said Marvin. "I like machines to make a bit of noise. Tells me what it's doing. Tells me whether it's about to explode."

"I'm not sure our customers would want that particular piece of information. I would like them to put things like these in their houses, and never even think about explosions."

"Customers?"

Griggin looked round at Marvin.

"Yes. You were going to sell these things, weren't you?"

Marvin stroked his beard.

"Never even thought about that, to tell you the truth."

Griggin started to laugh, but decided not to.

"If it's not an impertinent question, where does your money come from, if not from selling your devices?"

"Inherited it from me fa," said Marvin. "Set me up for life. Got it in an account in the Gnomeregan Cooperative Bank. As long as I don't go mad, I can live off the interest forever."

Griggin stared. He truly didn't know what to say. He looked back at the machine. It hadn't sprung any obvious leaks yet.

"Right, then. Let's see what this baby can do now."

"By the Titans! Thirty-one fifty, and I still can't hear it. I have to hand it to you, Steambender. You did a better job than I did."

Griggin grinned, and shook his head.

"Not so. This is still your machine. I've just made it a bit more, well, civilised. The way you hooked up the heat exchanger to the radiation converters? I wouldn't have thought of doing it like that. Not in a million years."

"Do you really think people would buy a machine like this?"

Griggin shrugged. "Sure. I would. All it needs is a bit of sheet metal to keep the unknowing away from the

machinery and we have a product. So how long do these crystals last?"

"Started experimenting with them ten years ago. This is the same crystal."

"Hm. Where'd you get them from?"

"Place in Kalimdor called Un'goro Crater. If you can fight off the wildlife, they're there to pick up. As many as you'd like. Got piles of them in the back."

They fell silent for a few moments, looking at the Optimal Prime 200(X) as it heated water to near boiling. Suddenly, Marvin laughed, and slapped Griggin's back.

"We've done it, mate! This is a useful machine. People will be cosy and warm in their homes because of our work. I think this calls for a celebration."

Griggin looked at the clock. It was almost time to go home. He looked aside at Marvin.

"Why don't you join us for dinner tonight? I'll introduce you to that weird and wonderful thing called family life. Lenna should be at the firing range, I'll ask her."

Marvin leaned against the blast screen.

"Even better. I'll take you all out to a place I know where the steak is good. Dinner's on me."

Griggin and Marvin walked into the corridor. Several mages were in different booths, wearing ear protectors and goggles, firing fireballs and frost bolts at their targets in nice, easy, regular rhythms. Griggin grinned, and stepped into the booth next to Lenna without her noticing. He concentrated, and launched a big shadow bolt at Lenna's target. He saw Lenna take a step back and look his way. The annoyed frown disappeared from her face for a grin.

"Don't shoot at other people's targets, love. It's very rude."

"I beg your forgiveness, dear." He pointed a hand at Marvin. "Meet my employer, Mr. Marvin Sprocket."

Though Lenna's smile was as friendly as it could be, there was an undertone of menace in the glint in her eyes.

"Mr. Sprocket. Pleased to meet you. So you are the Gnome who's trying to explode my husband?"

Marvin laughed. "Only slightly, Madam. In fact, your husband has just introduced a whole range of safety devices and rules. We hardly have any worthwhile explosions anymore."

Lenna's smile didn't even flicker.

"I'm trying to envisage the explosions, Mr. Sprocket. I'm afraid it's an occupational trait for fire mages. Did you mean an explosion this big?"

Lenna turned back into the booth and let fly a fireball that made the target disappear in a cloud of smoke.

"Or was it more like this big?"

Lenna took a deep breath, slowly extended her hands and let rip. The fireball sailed straight through the hall, hit the back wall and turned the back of the firing range into an inferno. The wet sand steamed, and bits of it started to glow. Several of the other mages stepped back out of their booths and gave Lenna disapproving looks. Marvin stared at the flames, his mouth hanging open.

"Um... more like the former, Ma'am."

"Oh good," said Lenna. "It's nice to see that my husband's rules and regulations are strictly adhered to."

"Absolutely, Madam."

"Mr. Sprocket has invited us to dinner, love," said Griggin. "And the kids, as well."

"He's not seen how much they can eat, has he?"

Marvin waved a hand. "I don't care. Your husband has turned one of my wild ideas into a marketable

device. If I have to buy the restaurant, it'll still be money well spent."

Lenna looked at Griggin. On the one hand, getting the children a nice meal for a change was good. On the other hand, they couldn't afford it themselves. No chance of returning the favour. She looked at Griggin, who seemed to like the idea.

"Well, in that case, we gratefully accept, Mr. Sprocket. Thank you very much."

"Splendid," said Marvin.

"So then the safety valve blew, just as he was reaching for the shutoff lever. Ye gods, I never knew he could jump that high at his age!"

Nix and Trixie burst out laughing. Lenna slowly looked round to Marvin. He caught her look and swallowed.

"But of course, now that your dad is working with me, that sort of thing doesn't happen anymore," he added hastily. "And a good thing it is, too."

Trixie reached out for another set of ribs, and started demolishing it. Sauce and grease were all over her face.

Griggin's eyes were gleaming. Marvin himself had chosen the Gnomeregan House of Ribs. Given the age and the healthy appetite of at least two of the Steambenders present, "All you can eat" came to a substantial amount of meat. Mr. Sprocket seemed to be enjoying himself as well. Griggin looked at Lenna's face. He recognised the expression of good-natured cheer with undertones of worry. He tore off one of his ribs and held it in front of her. Lenna's eyes turned round to him, and she grinned.

"For *me*?"

"For you."

Lenna accepted the offering and reached for the garlic sauce.

"You've had that sauce, right?"

"Lots."

Dinner finished, with coffee, and Mr. Sprocket wandered over to the bar to pay. He came back, and put a hand on Nix' and Trixie's shoulders.

"Right people. We're free to go. You two have done a great job on their profit margin. Well done!"

"My pleasure," said Trixie. "Thank you for the meal. It was great!"

"Yeah! Thanks," said Nix. "We don't get this at home."

Marvin looked into Nix' eyes, then at Griggin and Lenna.

"Well, when our water boilers start taking off, we'll fix that."

"Taking off," said Griggin, "In the sense of being sold in huge numbers."

Griggin and Lenna lay back in the shared cloud of garlic, Lenna's head on Griggin's shoulder.

"So," said Griggin. "What do you think of my boss?"

Lenna considered. "He's not a bad Gnome, I suppose. But I don't like his attitude to blowing up his assistants."

"Heh. That demonstration at the firing range was what you fire mages think of as 'a subtle hint', was it?"

"Looked like he needed it."

Griggin stared at the ceiling for a while.

"He's a genius. Everybody who's ever been to Un'goro has been able to pick up stacks of those

crystals. Rogues use chips of them to see by at night. You can use the ancient pylons there to convert them into strength boosters, but the effect wears off quickly and it isn't all that potent anyway. Only he found a way of using them to heat water. I would never have thought of that. And still, if I hadn't been there, that machine would just have ended up in a corner of the room, perhaps making him tea now and then. Making lots of them and selling them didn't even occur to *him*."

"Sounds like a mutually beneficial partnership to me, then." Lenna snuggled up closer. "Just don't get blown up in the process, dear."

"I'll try my best not to."

File GSB-033: Sufferance

Griggin was sitting in the small office of the Chief Warlock of his circle. An unkind expression was on the Chief's face. Griggin didn't even know his true name. When dealing with fellow Warlocks, he went by the name of Sindala. Few people who weren't Warlocks even knew that name. His face was partly hidden by a hood. The office was dark, lit only by a few candles in a chandelier. A dark place for dark business.

Griggin knew that, as Warlocks, they were walking the edge, not even between Good and Evil, but between the justifiable and the indefensible. It would be easy to say that Daemons were evil. Correct, perhaps, but insufficiently precise. Daemons regarded those in the world of the living, Gnome, Dwarf, Human, Elf, Orc, Tauren, as loathsome creatures. Cockroaches in the woodwork, to be exterminated if they became so arrogant as to make their presence felt. Warlocks were in the business of doing precisely that. Their defining characteristic was that they had the ability to summon the creatures from below, and control them. They were

born with in their minds a connection to the shadow realms where Daemons lived. They could hear the whispers, frightening, never ending. Nobody became a Warlock because he wanted to. A child born with the makings of a Warlock was seen as a curse upon the family, and Griggin had never found a cogent argument against that. Paladins could protect and heal, as could Priests. Even Warriors could bolster the spirits of their fellows. All that Warlocks could do was cause harm.

But still, sometimes, even in the best possible worlds, there exists the need for the ability to do harm. The Alliance might see itself as the embodiment of the Light, but still, it could not afford to be ignorant of the shadows. If there were no Warlocks, willing to put their souls at risk to learn the harsh lore, then the shining ones would be defenceless against it. Though the fact was seldom mentioned, Warlocks' help had been essential in the creation of the most powerful spells of cleansing used by Priests and Paladins. To fight the dark, one must look into it, take it apart to its basic components and see how they might be used against it. Warlocks walked those dark places, knowing that nobody could without being affected, tarnished.

To protect themselves, keep themselves from succumbing to the temptation of infinite power, Warlocks shielded themselves with rules. Rules to be followed to the letter, with harsh punishments if they were broken.

Griggin had broken one of the rules. It had not been one of the major ones, but still, he had broken it, knowingly and willingly. He looked up at the Chief Warlock.

"Griggin Steambender, you know why you have been summoned. You have threatened to use the Dark Arts against an unknowing one, and performed dark magic to do so." Chief Warlock Sindala looked down on Griggin. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Sir, I did so in order to extract my daughter from the situation she was in. Had I not done so, then she would have suffered more than she already has."

"That is no excuse. You know as well as I know, that Warlock Circles are unwelcome wherever they grow. Compared to others, we have a good reputation. We are known to be helpful. We have assisted the Gnomes, and though they still despise us, they acknowledge our help. That reputation has taken years to build up, and even a single infraction can ruin it."

"I am aware of that. I submit myself willingly to the consequences."

The Chief nodded slowly.

"Griggin, you should have known better. I would not have expected this of you. What exactly did you do?"

Griggin sighed. "The Head Master of my daughter's school was allowing a group of hoodlums to steal other people's money. Violence was used against a number of the weaker students. My daughter was among the victims, until she finally would take no more. The boys were hospitalised and she received a caning. The head master then informed me that he would not allow me to remove my daughter from that school and continue to punish her for crimes real or feigned. I could not allow that to happen. So I used a shield to change my appearance somewhat, and persuaded the head master to sign the documents."

"You succeeded in more than that. The head master is no longer in charge, and is facing several lawsuits. Perhaps that should have been your preferred course of action."

"Perhaps, Sir."

The Chief Warlock stood up, turned round. Griggin could see the glint of his eyes as he looked at Griggin

over his shoulder.

"Normally, Griggin, the punishment for a transgression such as yours would be demotion, or even expulsion from the Circle. But I have an offer to make you." He turned back to Griggin. "Another Warlock has transgressed more grievously than you have."

Griggin's face remained perfectly still, as he waited for the Chief Warlock to continue.

"One of our brethren has seen fit to summon a Succubus, restrain it with iron and pleasure himself with it."

Griggin said nothing. This was a crime of the first order. It was the one thing that a Warlock must *never* allow himself to do. Succubi were the last word in sexual temptation. In combat, their mental attacks could reduce the fiercest of warriors to helpless creatures, so that they would simply stand there, waiting for the Succubus' whip or the swords of its master's allies to finish him off. There were accepted uses for these creatures, and then there were unacceptable ones. Daemons already suffered greatly from being summoned, though their honour would not allow them to comment on this. To be used for such

purposes, compounded their suffering. The strict rule was never to touch a Succubus, at all. Even bumping into them by accident was a crime.

To complicate matters, any demon's dream was to gain control of its master. An Imp might try to convince its master that it was a harmless little friend, and then plead and beg its way to freedom. Perhaps trick Master into setting it free, or into committing a small infraction against it, for which it could then demand reparations. Voidwalkers usually bore their fate stoically, but would take a terrible revenge if control slipped. Succubi... Well, there was one thing they excelled at, and they used their obvious appeal with great skill and subtlety. To fall to the charms of a Succubus, was to be lost completely.

This Warlock had fallen completely.

His life was over.

"Usually, Griggin," said the Chief Warlock, "When a crime like this must be punished, we draw lots, and pray to what gods will still listen to us that the lot falls on someone else." He sat down, and looked at Griggin from under his cowl. "If you will take this one voluntarily, then I will make this," he pointed at the letters on his desk, "Go away."

Griggin did not trust his voice. He took a few deep breaths, as the task before him became clear. He had to appease the Succubus. The Succubus would be appeased by only one thing. Suffering. But it was not enough to give the Warlock to the Succubus, skilled though it was in the administration of pain. One of the Warlock Circle must do the deed, as an extra punishment for allowing one of their number to abuse one of the Demonic creatures. This time, rather than draw lots, the task would be put into Griggin's hands. He closed his eyes. It had been explained to him, when he joined the Inner Circle, that this might happen, and what would be expected of him. During his membership, he had known of only two other cases. He slowly opened his eyes and looked up at the Chief Warlock.

"I accept," he said.

"And what gives you the idea that you can just slope off for a week, huh?" Marvin frowned. "We've got the design on the five-hundred to complete."

"I must," said Griggin. "I have a task to perform for the Circle. I cannot refuse it. That is why I had you put a clause in my contract regarding religious

observances. This is one of those observances."

"By the Light, Griggin, I thought that was attending services now and then, not a full week's retreat."

"The ritual will take only one or two days. The rest of the time, I require to recover."

"Recover? What do you get up to?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't tell you. Look. I think the five-hundred prototype is nearly ready for commercialisation. All we need to do is get rid of a few rough edges. You can do that. When I get back, we'll go over it."

"Oh, alright then. But if I blow up the shop because you're not here, it'll be on your head."

Griggin simply nodded, and said nothing.

"So tell me," said Lenna. "What is this thing that you have to do?"

Griggin shook his head. "Warlock business. Ugly. I don't want you to know."

Lenna gave Griggin a sad look. "Aren't you allowed to talk about it? You never keep secrets from me. I know you. You are a good Gnome. You are a wonderful husband. You are a wonderful father to our

children. What can this possibly be, that you need to keep it from me?"

"Most of my Warlock business for the Circle falls under the non-disclosure agreement," said Griggin, "But even if it wouldn't, I would not want you to know. The knowledge would change you."

"Bollocks," said Lenna. "I didn't marry just the nice side of you, Griggin Steambender. I know that you sometimes have to do things most people wouldn't understand."

"This is not like confessing a habit of smoking or abuse of non-recommended substances! I have to..." Griggin stopped himself, shook his head. "No. I will not say. I cannot say." He looked up at Lenna. "Please. Don't try to make me. Don't ask. I won't answer."

"Ignorance is bliss?"

"Extacy. Believe me."

Lenna sighed. She got up from the sofa, held out her hand to Griggin. He took it and she pulled him to his feet. She wrapped her arms round him, held him tight.

"You are a good Gnome, and I love you," she said.

Griggin held Lenna to him, and tried to speak, but couldn't.

All was ready. They were in a special room, deep underground. No daylight would ever come into this place. It was lit with torches on the wall, and the red glow of two braziers. On one end of the room were the witnesses. On the other was the Succubus demon. The condemned Warlock stood in the middle of the room, bound with chains, suspended from the ceiling. He was a Human, about the same size as the Succubus. The instruments had been prepared for Griggin, laid out on tables. Their uses had been explained to him. He would have to use them all.

The Chief Warlock read out the sentence, but Griggin didn't listen. He stood to one side, staring ahead, preparing himself. The Chief Warlock stopped speaking. On the other end of the room, the Succubus stirred.

"Do not let him die too soon," it said.

Griggin looked round.

"Infraction. Plaintiff is not to speak during the procedure, unless asked a question."

The demon simply smiled. It was about to feast. Nothing could spoil its mood. Griggin's eyes turned to the Chief Warlock, who nodded. He walked to the middle of the room, and placed his hand on the

Human's shoulder. The last kind touch he would feel in his life. Griggin took up the first instrument, and commenced.

Griggin was back in the Chief Warlock's private office. As a concession to what had happened, a cup of tea was on the table in front of him. Griggin never drank tea.

"You have done well," said the Chief. "The demon has returned to its demesne and balance is restored. I have already taken care of the complaint against you. The former Head Master will trouble you no more. All is well."

Griggin looked up. Said nothing. It was three days ago now. He had slept maybe six hours in that time. His face was lined. More of his hair had turned grey. Since he had left the chamber, he had spoken no more than three words. He looked down on his hands. Closed his eyes. The images came back, and he opened his eyes again and looked at the teacup instead. Such an innocent object.

"I have conferred with the rest of the Circle. It was unanimously decided that your efforts more than offset

your earlier infraction, and that has been destroyed. Your slate is clean."

A surge of emotion passed through Griggin's body, starting in his stomach. Strange. Griggin had always thought that feelings reside in the spirit, in the brain. It was the first time he felt emotions in his fists. Where, come to think of it, did emotions truly reside? Griggin looked up.

"Thank you, Sir."

Chief Warlock Sindala put a hand on Griggin's shoulder.

"Now go outside, and see the people of Gnomeregan. Realise that they are alive, and happy, and unhurt, because of what you did."

"Yes Sir," said Griggin.

He sat down in one of the inns, at the far corner of the bar, and asked for a strong coffee. The place was lit with gas candles behind slightly tinted glass, turning the light brown. It was busy. Griggin's gaze passed over the people in the inn. A young couple was sitting at one of the small tables, looking only into each other's eyes, whispering and smiling a lot. Four older people were playing cards, cups of tea and small glasses of port

standing on the table next to the green baize playing cloth, stacks of cards neatly arranged. A bit further on at the bar were three Gnome lads, clutching pints of ale in their four fingered hands, talking too loudly. Griggin tried to imagine what the effect would be if an uncontrolled Succubus would enter this room and start lashing out. It did not bear thinking about. Griggin sipped his coffee. Clearly, he and the bar Gnome disagreed on what constituted strong coffee, but Griggin was in no mood for confrontation.

Warlocks had come a long way since the old days, when they would simply force Daemons to project themselves in the here and now, and do the Warlocks' bidding. Horrible, horrible mistakes had been made. Many people, Human, Dwarf, Gnome or otherwise, had been killed as a result. Those dark years had been what gave Warlocks their bad name, among the Daemons as well as among the uninitiated. And rightly so. Only fairly recently had there been a shift in thinking, which had eventually resulted in the current state of affairs, where both parties, Warlocks and Daemons, knew that either of them could do a lot more harm, so let's avoid that, shall we?

Griggin pushed away his coffee cup, half empty. He considered ordering something stronger than that, but numbing his mind with alcohol, he decided, was not what he needed. He looked up. Someone had spoken the word "warlock". His eyes moved in the direction of the sound, and saw that it was one of the beer-drinking lads. He started to pay attention to what they were saying.

"Yeah. Dated a Warlock girl once. Not too long, gave me the creeps. I asked her to show me what she could do, and she wouldn't."

"Why anyone'd want to be a Warlock is beyond me," said his mate.

"Well, at least you get a nice pet to play with. Wonder if you can make them the same size as a Gnome."

"Heh. The way those girls are stacked, who cares? And she has to do everything you say. You may never get a normal girl again, but it has its perks."

Griggin's eyes filled with tears. The sheer *stupidity* of it. Idiots! Ignorant fools! All these hormone-drenched louts could see was a pair of... *tits*. Didn't they see the horns? The hooved feet? The fangs, meant to tear and rend flesh? The long, cruel whip? The arsenal of spells that could utterly destroy someone? Succubi were

weapons, for the Light's sake, not, not... *Sex toys*.

"You alright Grandpa?" asked one of the lads.

Griggin took a deep breath. It was the first time in his life anyone had called him that. Ye gods, he must be looking dire.

"No," he said. "I am not alright."

"So what's the problem?"

"Heh," one of the lads grinned. "Maybe he's just realised what he should've done to get some action. Become a Warlock. Then, you can just make a girlfriend!"

Griggin's dark eyes turned, glinting, towards the lad. Maybe a third his own age.

"I *am* a Warlock," said Griggin, with that specific calm tone of voice that indicates that the other speaker has precisely twelve seconds to clear the blast area. "And you have no idea how stupid a remark you have just made."

"Cor," said another. "Show us yer demons, then. You know the one we want!"

Griggin scowled. "I cannot do that. The Daemon you refer to is called a Succubus, of Sayaad origin. They are summoned for combat only, and I have no wish to

kill. But I can tell you what they will do to you. A Succubus will start with what they call a Soothing Kiss. It is not as pleasant as it sounds. It renders you unable to move. Then, they will wait a few moments, and with their whip take out your eyes so you cannot see where the next stroke will land. That whip is powerful enough to take off someone's hand in a single stroke. Most people will wake up for a moment, then, and try to flee. Futile. It can move quicker than you, even if you still had your eyes. When you finally stop running round in circles, they will strike you again. They know every sensitive spot on the Gnome body. They generally save the genitals as a special treat to themselves. They will slowly introduce you to greater and greater amounts of pain, until you no longer have skin on you. That can take minutes, hours, days if the Daemon wants it. And all that time, you will be begging it, not to stop, but for another kiss."

Griggin glared at the Gnome lad. "And that is just the beginning. I have seen creatures with all their skin stripped away, so you can see the muscles underneath. *Still alive*. I have seen what a Succubus can do when it is in a nasty mood, and they are *always* in a nasty mood."

He fished in his pocket, slapped a few coins onto the bar and pulled his coat on. He made towards the door, and looked once over his shoulder. The boys were simply sitting there with their mouths hanging open. People round him were staring at him.

"When you see one of these creatures," said Griggin, "Run."

"Leave me alone!"

Trixie stared at her father. He'd *never* snapped at her like that before. He'd been gone a week, and to be honest, she didn't think he'd really returned yet. He'd hardly spoken, not been in the mood for evening games, and had taken to returning to work after dinner.

"Dad?"

Trixie put a hand on her father's arm. Griggin closed his eyes a moment, and looked into Trixie's eyes.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you, Trixie. I have no excuse."

"What happened to you, Dad? What did they do to you?"

Griggin sighed, tried not to look at his hands.

"Nothing was done to me. I have had to do," he swallowed, "Terrible things. Please don't ask me what. I don't want to remember."

Trixie said nothing for a while, simply looking at her father with blue eyes, and a serious expression on her face.

"Dad, they're teaching us where all the major organs are in the bodies of Humanoids. That's so we can kill them quicker, or put them out of action while keeping them alive, so we over-stress their healers. I've been practicing the best way to cut someone's hamstring so they can't run away, and the right strokes to cause bleeding wounds." She took her father's hand in hers. "We're not nice people anymore, Dad."

Griggin said nothing.

"You've had to execute someone, haven't you, Dad?"

Griggin closed his eyes. Then, he nodded once.

"Well, I'm sure that person was better off with you doing it than someone else."

Griggin looked up at his daughter. He put his arms round her, pulled her to him and held her. She didn't start protesting for a long time. He looked into her eyes, and for the first time, smiled again.

"Thank you."

File GSB-042: Competition

"Good morning, Mr. Sprocket. I'll get straight to the point. I've seen your line of water heaters, and I think they have potential. A lot of potential. With our financial aid and expertise behind them, they can go far."

Marvin looked at Mr. Macehandle, an amused look on his face. Griggin was sitting next to him, and the old fart hadn't as much as acknowledged his existence. Macehandle continued.

"Just think about it. Your units have proven to be extremely reliable, and with your idea of powering them with Un'goro crystals, you are sitting on a goldmine."

Mr. Macehandle paused a moment, poured himself another cup of coffee, held up the jug. Marvin and Griggin both shook their heads.

"But still, your entire manufacturing plant seems to consist of your own four hands. Since you started, you have built maybe two hundred units in total. Everybody needs hot water, Gentlemen. Why isn't there a unit in every home yet?"

"Well, we're working on it," said Marvin. "Got a bit of a backlog. Luckily, young Nix is lending a hand."

Mr. Macehandle shook his head, smiling. "Just two and a half Gnomes working from a small workshop in the Lower Industrial Estate? Gentlemen, with our manufacturing capacity, we can double your entire output in a *day*. We could put an Optimal Prime in every home. You could be rich!"

Marvin laughed. "Mr. Macehandle, I am *already* rich. My father, may his soul be part of the Light Everlasting, left me his fortune that he earned with his own hands. He also earned it with a stomach ulcer and finally stopped earning it with a heart attack brought on by worries. He did that for me, so I would never have to. Worry, that is. The worst thing I worry about is one of my machines developing a sudden fault and going boom. And since my associate, Mr. Steambender, has worked for me, even that worry has largely been put to rest. In short, Mr. Macehandle, I don't *want* to put an Optimal Prime in every home. I just want one in every home where I like the people."

"But surely, you understand that the technology you have developed could be of benefit to *all* Gnomes? Would you withhold it from them simply because you

can't build units fast enough?"

Griggin sat back in his chair. It was not a cheap one, but at the same time, it wasn't comfortable. Mr. Macehandle didn't want people to be comfortable in his office. He wanted them to get in, give to him what he wanted of them and get out again. And what he wanted from Marvin, was his idea for extracting heat from Un'goro crystals. And no wonder. Marvin had explained to him, in broad terms, how it worked, but truth be told, Griggin still didn't know exactly what made the unit glow. He could build one, but exactly how the radiation turned cold water into hot water was a secret only known to Marvin. Presumably, Mr. Macehandle's people had obtained one of their units and taken it apart to see how it worked. And then, when they put it back together again, they'd found that it didn't anymore. What a pity.

Griggin glanced at Marvin. In the last year or so, he'd learnt to read his expressions quite well. He was getting annoyed. Macehandle was circling like a fly round a sugarbowl. Griggin looked again. Or at least, he thought he was. He might be circling like a moth round a candleflame.

"Mr. Macehandle," said Marvin, "Let's stop avoiding the issue. I am aware of your attempts to reverse-engineer my technology. From our presence here, I deduce that your efforts were in vain, or we would be seeing Macehandle Everlasting Water Boilers by now. So now, you are trying to get the secret from me for money. Well, Sir, I don't need your money, thank you very much."

Marvin and Griggin were walking along one of the many passageways in Gnomeregan. Marvin was chuckling to himself. Griggin looked round.

"What?"

"Heh. He was going to make me rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Bastard." He sighed. "So now I'm wondering. What if I hadn't been sitting on Daddy's fortune? Would I still have told him to get stuffed? And you know what? I think I would have. We've got enough money coming in from our boilers to keep me and your family clothed and warm. I don't need any more. You seem to be happy. Stuff everything else."

Griggin grinned, then stared ahead.

"I don't know. I probably would have. A year ago, I was pretty much at the end of my tether. It's one thing

when you're sure where your next meal is coming from. A nice big lump sum would have let me get out of this place." He said nothing for a few steps. "Mind you. I don't think Old Mr. Macehandle intended to make you rich. He wanted to get his hands on your designs. Once he knows how it works, you've outlived your usefulness."

"Fat chance," said Marvin. "It's not exactly a commonly-known property of Un'goro crystals. I stumbled onto it purely by accident."

"That's traditional," said Griggin. "Most useful things are invented looking for something else."

"That's true. I was looking for a place to hide from one of those Diemetradons. I'm lucky it couldn't squeeze through the opening. Ye gods, I'm glad I was carrying an extra pair of trousers."

They rounded the corner to their workshop. Marvin suddenly grabbed Griggin's arm and pointed. They stopped.

"Did you leave the door open, or has that son of yours come in?"

"Nix wouldn't leave a door open. He leaves things as he finds them. Second nature for Rogues."

"Then who?"

Griggin's eyes narrowed.

"Let's find out. Marvin Sprocket, meet Hurzag."

He reached into his pocket, and took out a small crystal. Magic started to flow, and there was a weird, grinding sound. Then, a deep voice rang out.

"Why have you summoned me?"

Griggin turned to the giant blue creature and bowed his head.

"Hurzag, I have summoned you to protect me and mine. Please attack any who threaten me."

"I obey."

Marvin stood still, mouth open, looking at the Daemon.

"Who... what... is *that*?"

"This is Hurzag. I did tell you I was a Warlock didn't I? This is a Voidwalker."

"Is that *safe*?"

"Not in any way shape or form," said Griggin. "Let's see who's inside, if any. Do you have any skills in fighting?"

"No!"

"Then stay back."

Griggin sent the blue giant in first. It had no legs. instead, it floated on a cloud of blue smoke. Its massive claws opened and closed as it advanced. Griggin followed at a small distance, hands aglow with shadow magic. The Daemon somehow squeezed itself through the opening, and there was a noise inside of things falling over. Then, a big, burly Gnome came running out and ran into Griggin, bowling him over. He made a run for it. Griggin swore at himself.

"Hurzag!" he shouted.

The Daemon's deep voice rang out. "I. Must feed," Hurzag floated after the burglar at a speed that needed no legs. He caught up and slammed a fist into the burglar's back. The burglar fell down, and Hurzag pummeled him.

"Hurzag! Stop! Return to me."

"Yes," said Hurzag, and took his place beside Griggin, who ran towards the unfortunate burglar. One look was enough. Hurzag's first attack had broken his back, and the following strokes had finished him off. There was a call from inside.

"Dad? Is that you?"

In a flash, Griggin jumped up and ran to the workshop. Nix was crouched on the floor. Next to him

was the still body of another Gnome. Griggin looked at Nix, then at the body.

"He's alive, dad. They were going through our papers, but there was two of them so I wasn't going to come out of hiding. But then Big Blue came in and scared them off. So I persuaded one of them to stay."

Griggin sighed. "You did better than I did, Son. Mine won't talk anymore."

Nix gave his father a look.

"Well, that'll teach them not to break into our workshop. Don't feel bad, Dad. These guys would have splatted me if they'd found me. They're the types."

Marvin came into the shop, pale as a sheet.

"That Gnome is *dead*," he said. His eyes fell on the figure of the other Gnome, and he started to shake, looking at Nix as if with new eyes.

"He is not dead, but sleeping," said Nix. "He is not dead at all."

Griggin sighed, and turned to his Voidwalker.

"Return to your demesne in peace, Hurzag, with my thanks."

"I am Void," said Hurzag, "where prohibited."

Hurzag's form faded and disappeared. Griggin shook his head.

"That was a *joke*," he said. "One thing Demonology teaches you is never to be surprised at anything."

He bent down, picked up a chair and gently pushed it against the backs of Marvin's knees. Marvin sat down, still shaking.

"You two are..." Marvin faltered.

Nix grinned. "Bloody scary. Don't worry Mr. Sprocket. We're the good guys."

"Quiet Nix," said Griggin, softly. "I think we'd better call in the guards. How long till this one wakes up?"

Nix looked. "Half an hour or so."

"Should be enough."

"So what you're saying is this guy attacked you, and you defended yourself?"

"Precisely," said Griggin.

"He's got broken bones. You defended yourself pretty well. You seem to be unhurt."

"I have some skills in the martial arts. Unfortunately, in the consternation, I hit him too hard."

The guard gave Griggin a long hard look. The other thug had been blathering about big blue monsters. There was something this Gnome wasn't saying.

"I remember you," said the guard. "You were there a few months ago when we had to beat back those troggs. That little bugger of yours shot one of the troggs that was about to jump on me dad. Are you sure you didn't make one of those big nasty demons?"

Griggin looked into the guard's eyes.

"What would be the difference if I defended myself by means of a Voidwalker?"

There was a small, unpleasant pause. Technically, it didn't make any difference whether this little demon-botherer hit that thug with his fists or not. Still, to a judge, there might be a significant difference between bravely fending off the blows of a larger opponent and setting a massive demon on him. The guard didn't like warlocks. Not a little bit. But this particular warlock had probably saved his dad a beating from a big trogg. He gave Griggin a little nod, wrote something in his notebook and closed it.

"Right. That's all, Mr. Steambender. Please don't leave town. There may be more questions to answer."

"Thank you," said Griggin.

Marvin was sitting at the table in his workshop. His fright had passed, to be replaced by a slow burning anger.

"Bastards," he said.

Griggin said nothing.

"They knew we'd be out of the shop, because Macehandle bloody *invited* us. That's probably the only reason he invited you as well. He wanted the shop empty so he could have a good rummage in our plans."

"For all the good it'd do them," said Griggin. "All the piping around the heater is pretty much standard. The key bit is your radiation converter."

"Yeah," said Marvin. "Good luck finding the prints to that."

Griggin looked at Marvin. unpleasant thoughts were occurring to him.

"Those only exist in your head," he said. "Do you think they are safe there?"

Marvin wasn't listening. He stared into his half-empty coffee cup, then up at Griggin again.

"Also, he didn't know your boy would be in here. Luckily, young Nix was bright enough to hide himself.

That could have gotten ugly."

Griggin scowled.

"I know."

"We may have to step up security in this place a bit."

At that moment, there was a loud bang at the door, and it flew open. Silhouetted in the doorway was a female Gnome. She ran at Griggin, looked him up and down for injuries, then launched herself at him, arms tightly round him.

"Thank the Light you're alright."

"I am, love. I am."

Lenna looked up into Griggin's face.

"I just heard. Nix told me. What the blazes is going on?"

"Industrial espionage," said Marvin, savouring the words as though they had an unpleasant taste. "Mr. Macehandle seems to think we're not taking proper care of our inventions and wishes to use them to enrich himself. Even further."

Lenna's green eyes burned with anger.

"Wish I'd been there. I'd have given them something to make them feel sorry."

Marvin stared at Lenna.

"Just tell me. Are you a warlock as well?"

Lenna grinned at Marvin.

"No. I'm nastier than that."

Gorren Macehandle was walking from the tavern back to his home, when he heard footsteps behind him. He looked over his shoulder, and laughed. Just a woman going in the same direction he was. That's your conscience playing tricks on you again, Macehandle. Thought he'd managed to beat that into submission by now. He picked up his pace, and turned into one of his favourite shortcuts. Behind him, the woman also picked up the pace. Macehandle took bigger steps, though the sound of footsteps behind him did not fade into the distance. In fact, they came nearer and nearer. A chill ran up macehandle's spine. You didn't get to where he was by making a few enemies here and there. Resisting the temptation to look back, he tried to walk faster.

The temperature dropped, and Macehandle felt like he was frozen to the ground. He could not take another step. As he looked down... he blinked. A block of ice

was round his legs. Cold. He struggled, but he could not free his legs. He looked round. The woman was standing behind him.

"Mr. Macehandle."

"What do you want?"

"You have set your thugs on my husband. You have set them on my *child*. Nobody does that to my family. Nobody."

The ice blocks round Macehandle's feet faded, and he could turn round to face the woman.

"Is that supposed to be a threat?"

The woman took a few steps closer. She raised a hand, and out of nowhere, a light appeared, destroying his night vision until he could only see the blaze in the woman's hand.

"I am a master fire mage, Mr. Macehandle. Your son has threatened my daughter with violence to get her money. Your employees have threatened my son, my husband and his employer. They might have killed them given the chance. I do not go in for idle threats. I am debating with myself whether to kill you now or not. Can you think of a good reason why I should not kill you now?"

"You... wouldn't. The authorities."

"The authorities would find only charred remains, Mr. Macehandle. They might recognise it as Gnomish, but not much beyond. In case you haven't noticed, there's a war on. The authorities have more important things to look into. They'd probably blame the Horde. I can see why the Horde might want to assassinate one of the major players in Gnomeregan's industries."

"You wouldn't get away with it! They'd find you! You'd be thrown in jail. Murder is a capital offence! They'd hang you!"

"And I'm sure that would come as a great comfort to you, as you lie rolling on the floor, burning. I'm not afraid of death, Mr. Macehandle. Especially not if I die knowing I've defended my own."

"You're... mad!"

"Mad? You haven't seen anything yet, Mr. Macehandle."

The light grew brighter.

"If I ever have cause to think of you again, Mr. Macehandle, then I know where you live. I know where your son goes to school. I know where you sleep. Even if by some means you manage to get rid of me, you will not get rid of all my family. And if any of us suffers at

your hands again, we will come rampaging in your home." Lenna's face was inches from Macehandle's. "And that, Mr. Macehandle, *is* a threat."

Before Macehandle could move or speak, magic flowed. With a sickening noise, he felt his body change. He tried to scream, but instead, he squealed.

The spell wore off a few minutes later, and Macehandle sat, back to the wall, taking shivering breaths, feeling his arms, his legs, his face. The hell-woman was nowhere to be seen.

"Warlocks. Wizards. Mages."

He scowled.

"I'll get them. I will."

File GSB-043: Alignment

Marvin found himself in a dark room. He was sitting on a chair, cold, hard, made of metal. His arms were tied to the armrests. His legs were also fixed in place. He tried to look around him, but even his Gnomish night vision was no match for the complete darkness that surrounded him. There was no sound either, just his own breath, his own heartbeat. He tried moving the chair, but it had been bolted to the floor. Should he shout out? Keep quiet?

He heard something starting to hiss, then a small "pop" as a gas candle burst into life. It quickly burned brighter and brighter, till Marvin blinked, unable to see anything beyond the circle of light on the floor. Someone spoke.

"Good day, Mr. Sprocket. I trust you are comfortable?"

"What?"

"Excellent. Now I assume you know why you are here, but just in case that is not clear yet, we want the

operating principles to your water heater. You are going to tell us how it works, and how to build them."

"Like hell I am! Get me out of here!"

There was a cold laugh.

"Mr. Sprocket, the only way you are coming out of this place is down the chute into the disposal facilities. If you tell us what we want to know, then it will be a quick and painless procedure. If you decide not to tell us, then it will *not* be quick, neither will it be painless."

Marvin turned pale, and his teeth started to chatter.

"You'd kill me, for a bloody *boiler*?"

"Partly, yes. Though in truth, you have brought this upon yourself. You and your associates have unwisely decided to play hard-ball with Mr. Macehandle. As you should realise by now, Mr. Macehandle has been playing that game far longer than you have. I am afraid he is much better at it than you are."

"Who are you?"

"My name is of no consequence. I am simply one of Mr. Macehandle's employees, charged with the gathering of information. By any means, Mr. Sprocket."

There was a slight noise, and someone stepped into the circle of light, though his face was still in the

shadows.

"According to my observations, a Gnome shot through the head with a small-calibre handgun dies in three seconds, no more. That will be your reward, should you choose to cooperate fully. If you do not, then this is what will happen."

The Gnome reached behind him and pushed a small trolley into the light, noiselessly. On it were a number of instruments.

"This pair of tongs, Mr. Sprocket, is easily capable of severing finger joints. If I am not satisfied with your level of cooperation, I will start by removing the first joint of your left hand. I assume you are right-handed? Good. I would not want you to be incapable of signing anything. To avoid you bleeding to death, I will then cauterise the wound with this soldering iron. On your left hand, Mr. Sprocket, you have twelve joints. I have rarely needed to proceed to the other hand to ensure results. I will leave you a while to ponder this. I will return in an hour."

There was the sound of a door closing. The light went out.

It's often said that when you are deprived of sight, your other senses sharpen. That is actually a myth. You don't hear better, you just pay more attention. To Marvin, the small scratches at the door were as loud as explosions. There was a click, and the door opened, silently. A tiny light appeared in the opening and floated towards him. As it drew closer, Marvin could see the pale face of Nix.

"Oh shit. Oh shit. Mr. Sprocket? What have they done to you?"

"N-nothing yet, lad. Please! They'll be back within the hour."

"Not to worry, Mr. Sprocket," said Nix, opening the restraints. "Now I can't get you out now, because I can't sneak you past the guards. I just need to hide you somewhere and we'll bust you out."

Nix led Marvin up through a long corridor. At the end was another door. Putting a finger on his lips, Nix listened at the door, opened it. he waved Marvin on. A few moments later, they were both in a broom cupboard.

"Right," said Nix. "This'll do. I'll get Mum, Dad and Trixie and we'll have you out of here in no time. Don't move, sit tight. I'll be back."

Marvin gave Nix a short nod, sat down and pulled some empty bags over him. Nix left.

"Alright, family. We know where Marvin is. There's about a half dozen guards between him and us, and we'll need to put them out of action. *Not* permanently, I hasten to add. Strictly non-lethal methods must be used at all times."

"Yeah," said Nix. "Killing the extras is bad form."

"Not only is it bad form," said Griggin, "But they have nothing to do with us per se. We will not allow innocents to be killed on our behalf."

Trixie snorted. She was checking her sword for imperfections. A shortsword for use in cramped quarters.

"These guys, it's going to be hard finding something they're innocent of."

Griggin frowned. "Nevertheless, I want them all to be breathing after we leave."

"What if it's them or me?"

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," said Lenna. For the occasion, she was using her staff. Though she had been trained in staff fighting, it was mainly a focusing

device for her magic spells. She had her dark grey robes on, hood pulled up.

They crept closer to the back entrance of Macehandle's storehouse. Two guards were in front of the door, and two more were patrolling. Griggin pointed.

"Nix, when the patrol moves away, can you distract the guards? Then, with them chasing you, we'll get in the door."

Nix looked. "Sure, dad. No problem. How do I get in?"

"Same way as before. We'll meet up at the end of the hall."

"Right," said Nix. He looked round and grabbed a few pebbles for throwing. He grinned at the rest of the family. "Well, see you all inside. Try not to trip over your own feet."

As they watched, they saw one of the guards suddenly look up, nudge his mate and draw a sword. Keeping about thirty yards apart, they advanced slowly in the direction Nix' pebbles had fallen. Griggin waited till they had rounded the corner, then held up three fingers, two, one... They all ran forward, opened the door and moved inside.

Trixie's eyes were shining. "So far, so good," she said.

"Shh," whispered Lenna.

Keeping as quiet as they could, they moved to the end of the hall, and found a dark corner to hide in, in one of the offices. After ten minutes or so, Nix joined them.

"They fell for it," said Nix. "Not sure I can pull the same trick again, though. They'll call in some of their friends."

"We'll deal with that when we have to," said Griggin
"Lead on, Nix."

They crept on, out of the storehouse office space and into the storehouse proper. Crates of goods were stacked high by cranes. Trixie looked round. For the occasion, she'd borrowed one of Nix' leather suits of armour, because chainmail was not the best you could get for stealth. It wasn't very good. It was a bit too large for her, and still it pinched in places.

"If we're going to do this more, I'll get some leather armour made for girls," said Trixie.

Nix glared at Little Sister. Let me explain. We're *sneaking*. That means no bloody noise. He said nothing.

Griggin frowned. "Quiet now. Light ahead."

There was a small wooden structure ahead of them, a canteen for the use of the storehouse workers' lunch and coffee breaks. Nix drew close to his father, and whispered.

"Two Gnomes. One chain, one plain clothes. I suppose the plain clothes one is going to work on Mr. Sprocket, with help from Chains."

"Not if we have anything to say about it, said Lenna." Her usually friendly face was hard as stone as she looked at Griggin. "Does the moratorium against lethal force also apply to torturers?"

Griggin took a deep breath, then pulled his mind back to the here and now.

"It does. We want only to extract Marvin. Other objectives could jeopardise that."

Nix nodded. "I've left him in a side cupboard in the basement. Hatchway is outside the canteen. I've oiled the hinges, so it should be quiet.

"Good," said Griggin. "Move out."

With Lenna and Trixie standing guard, Griggin and Nix carefully opened the hatch down to the basement. They all slipped in and closed the doors behind them.

The lights were off, and Nix pulled out his glowing chip of Un'goro crystal. By its dim light, they could just about make out the corridor. Doors opened left and right. Some of the doors were heavy refrigerator doors, others were normal wooden double doors for goods that needed to be kept safe. Marvin had been in one of the refrigerators, presumably because the refrigerators were also sound proof. Nix pointed at one of the wooden doors.

"Everybody, hide there. Trix, don't draw your weapon unless you need it. It shines. I'll go fetch Mr. Sprocket and bring him here. Then, we all move out."

Nix lifted his crystal so people could see his face.

"Whatever you do, sit tight unless someone spots you. Become the dark. Don't move. Don't speak. Don't look at people's faces because your eyes shine. Got that? Good."

Nix hid away his crystal, and darkness became absolute. With a whisper, he was gone.

Nix opened the door to the cupboard where he had left Marvin Sprocket. In the quiet dark space where Rogues were in their element, his breath was a loud noise, and the small noises he made as he tried to

push himself into the wall sounded to Nix' ears like a cave-in.

"Mr. Sprocket?"

"Nix?"

"Shh. The rest is here. We're going to get you out of here. We have the muscle to overcome the guards now. I'll take you to them, and then we'll..."

Nix looked round. Behind him, a bright blaze came through the cracks in the door, and he could hear voices.

"Still don't understand why you didn't let me rough him up a bit. Show him we mean business."

"I think he already knows that. I don't think I'll even have to touch him for the desired result. Please refrain from telling me how to do my job, Mr. Macehandle."

Nix frowned in the dark. Macehandle? That could only mean... *Grog*? He sneered. Of course. Only natural that Young Grog would be entering the company's employ. Next to him, Marvin's breath became shallow, and shaky. Nix pulled out his crystal, held it up to his face and put his fingers on Mr. Sprocket's cheek. He looked round to him, and Nix put a finger on his lips. Quiet. He looked back at the door. Within a few seconds now, they would notice that Mr.

Sprocket was gone. They would realise he'd had help. They would call in their friends. Unless we stop them.

Griggin put his hand on Trixie's arm as she grabbed the hilt of her sword.

"Wait," he whispered.

They could hear voices in the other room, arguing. Then someone came out.

"Well, I'm getting the guards. Do I have to explain to you what will happen if he gets away?"

There was a soft noise, and a thud. Then, Nix' voice.

"Help me close the door!"

Griggin and Trixie rushed out to find Nix as he threw what of his weight there was against the door. Despite this, it was starting to open. Someone's hand could be seen round it. Quick as lightning, Trixie drew her sword, and rapped on the Gnome's knuckles with the butt end. There was a yelp from inside and the hand disappeared. They all threw themselves against the door and managed to close it. From inside, faint noises could be heard. Nix grinned.

"Isn't it nice, how you can't hear people scream inside that room?"

There was a whimper from the other end of the corridor.

"Easy, Marvin," said Griggin. "We're going home."

Marvin glared, and said nothing.

"I think the time for stealth has passed," said Griggin.

He grabbed one of his soul-shards and summoned Hurzag.

"Hurzag, do not attack, unless I say. Trixie, you're on point. Nix, stay with Marvin. Lenna, stay with me. Marvin, stay between us. We're going to run out. Let nothing stand in our way. Non-lethal attacks only. Move!"

Trixie drew her sword, then looked down on the still form on the floor. Her jaw dropped.

"*Grog?*"

She frowned, and kicked him in the ribs where he lay.

"If it wasn't for you, you bastard, we wouldn't be here."

"Trixie! Stop that. Now *move!*"

They drew together in a tight formation, Hurzag in front, and pushed their way out of the door. Trixie slammed it behind them, and they ran. Lenna turned

round. Raising her staff, she cried out and a large ball of fire engulfed the door.

"That ought to keep them in for a bit," she said.

Griggin grabbed her arm and pushed her along.

"More than one door? Keep moving."

With inspired speed, the Steambenders, Marvin in their midst, ran.

Lenna had found a kettle and made tea. Since the arrival of the coffee maker, they didn't often have tea anymore, but Marvin seemed to drink little but, and he was definitely in need of something to calm his nerves.

"Any milk, Mr. Sprocket?"

Marvin looked at her as though she was speaking in tongues. Lenna spotted the cold-box, put milk in Marvin's tea and pushed the mug into his hands.

Marvin looked at it as though he'd never seen a mug of tea before. He hadn't stopped shaking yet.

"T-they were going to *kill* me!"

Trixie grinned. "Not with us on the job, they aren't! Go us!"

Marvin slowly, carefully took a few sips of tea.

Griggin stood in front of him, looking at his bearded

face, worried.

"Are you alright, Marvin?"

Marvin took a few deep breaths, and his face turned red. With a sudden motion, he threw the mug of tea across the room. It shattered on the wall, tea dripping down.

"No, I'm *not* bloody alright! What the hell do you think?"

"Marvin, you're safe now. We got you out."

"Safe, am I? What if the bloody Macehandles try to grab me again?"

Griggin put his hand on Marvin's arm. "We won't let them."

Marvin slapped away Griggin's arm.

"Stay away from me! What the hell is wrong with you people? Don't you bloody stop to think *ever*?"

"Eh... what?"

Marvin's eyes blazed at Griggin.

"Before I met you, I had exactly two worries in the world. Not to blow up any of my contraptions and try to keep my partner mostly sane. Now this evening I spent with some horrible bastard who wanted to, wanted to, cut my bloody *fingers* off and then shoot me in the head

after I'd told him how to build a bloody *kettle!*"

"Well, we got you out," said Nix. "You're welcome."

Marvin slowly looked round at Nix.

"May I remind you, Nix Steambender, that it was *you* people who got me *in* this trouble in the first place?" He looked round. "Own up. Which one of you bloody geniuses thought it would be a good idea to play, as they call it, 'hard-ball' with Gorren Macehandle? Well?"

Lenna gave Marvin one of her cold stares.

"Gorren Macehandle sent his thugs here to steal your designs. He threatened my *son*, Mr. Sprocket. Nobody threatens my family and gets away with it."

"No they don't, do they? One of them is in the sodding graveyard, and the other is in the House for the Bewildered. Did it ever, in all these... adventures, occur to you borderline criminals to notify the authorities?"

Nix sneered.

"Yeah that would have been easy. The people guarding the storehouse were city guards. Macehandle owns them."

Marvin stared at Nix, and his face turned pale.

"We were fighting the bloody *city guards?*"

Marvin put his head in his hands, stared at his feet.

"Oh by the thundering Titans. How am I ever going to work in this town again? How am I going to *live* here?"

Griggin closed his eyes a moment.

"Marvin. We will help you in any way we can. We will sort this out, I promise."

Marvin looked up.

"No you bloody won't. Get out of my shop, the lot of you. I don't want to see any of your faces in here again. Do I make myself clear?"

Nobody spoke for a long, long moment.

"Get out!"

Griggin sighed, as he tied off the cover of the cart he'd bought. Inside was all that would fit of his house. A second-hand mechanostrider was in front of it. He'd bought it as a salvage job, and had managed to get it going again with many an hour of fiddly work. It would not collapse again, or if it did, it wouldn't unfold again, but it would pull. The authorities had not been at their doors yet, presumably because they were busy elsewhere. It couldn't last forever, though. Better to be someplace else. He opened the door and went inside.

The house already looked like a foreign place to him. Empty spots where pictures had been, appliances removed, leaving connections sticking out for steam and gas. Lenna had made sandwiches, as their crocks and plates were already on the cart. They ate in silence. Griggin closed the door for the last time and dropped the keys in the mailbox.

"Too late now if you've forgotten anything people."

"Pff," said Nix. "I can open it if you want."

Griggin shook his head. "No, you can't. Let's go."

They got on the cart, and set off. It was a little way from their house to the exit. They were going to make for the Dwarf town of Ironforge. Presumably, Dwarfs would like hot water as much as Gnomes, and there was always something to do there for a competent engineer. Or at least Griggin hoped so.

They could see tunnel that led to the great elevator lying in the distance. It would take them up to the surface, and out. None of them had been on the Outside for a long time. Well. Nothing for it.

Just as they drew up to the entrance to the elevator tunnel, every siren in the whole of Gnomeregan went off at the same time.

File GSB-044: Destruction

Vernon Sparkmantle looked out of the door to his house. Outside, every bloody alarm was going off. Cut them already, we get the message. Something's up. The question was, what? Behind him, a tiny voice spoke up.

"Papa?"

"Shush, dear. Have to see what the noise is."

"Magic?"

"Don't know. Could be. Probably."

Vernon looked over his shoulder at his young daughter, Bieslook. He made himself smile. His wife, part of the Light, would have had her in her arms by now, muttering those words that could always put her at ease. He looked out again. His breath stuck in his throat, and he slammed the door shut. Several large, burly individuals were roaming the pathways of Gnomeregan, no doubt intent on killing anything Gnomish in the place. Oh damn. So that's what all this racket was in honour of. For such a commotion to be

made of it, it had to be bad. Vernon winced. He was needed. He should be helping fighting the troggs with his fellow mages. He opened one of his window shutters a crack, and peered out. There were dozens of them. Hundreds! And they were going from house to house. He snapped the window shut again. It was only a matter of time. He didn't dare look at Bieslook, for fear that she might catch on to his despair. What to do, what to do? Would anything he did make any difference?

Vernon took a deep breath. He walked into his bedroom, and opened his wardrobe. Deep down, in the back, there was the box. In the box were his old cloak, leggings, robes, shoes. All of it crackling with magic gems and enchantments. Back then, it had been the best that money and favours could buy. It was still better than most. Vernon shuddered as he put on the old familiar armour. Then, he put his fingers behind the wardrobe and pulled. Behind the wardrobe, stuck to the wall with duct tape, was his old staff. His fingers trembled as he took it. Looking at Iris' grave, he had vowed never to take up this staff again in his life. He had been content simply to teach the various spells to wandering mages, but never again to use them himself.

Not after what happened. As he looked at the old, dark wood in his hand, he felt the familiar tingle of power course through him. It gave him no comfort. It was not enough to battle this many enemies, but perhaps it would be enough to take Bieslook somewhere safe. Vernon closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, my love," he said. "But I have to."

"What is *that*? Are the Guards after us?" Lenna's eyes narrowed as she looked at her husband. "That's a bit excessive isn't it?"

Griggin jumped off the cart. "Get out of here. Get Nix and Trixie to safety. Make for Kharanos first, then if I don't join you there tomorrow, head for Ironforge. I'll find you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find out what this is all about. I'm going to the Warlock Circle."

"Why? What have they done for you?"

"They kept me alive when I heard the whispers of the Demons for the first time. Trust me, I do not intend to stay here longer than strictly necessary. I simply want to find out what is going on. Now get!"

Lenna looked at her husband with moist eyes. She wrapped her arms round him, then kissed him.

"Just so you know. If you don't show up in Kharanos, let alone Ironforge, I'm coming to look for you."

"Understood. Now move before the children catch on."

Griggin ran down the stairs to the Warlocks' meeting place. These places were traditionally built underground, "to be closer to the Demon Worlds", even though their relative positions had as much meaning to each other as the state of Gnomeregan to the state of despair. Still, Warlocks felt least uncomfortable in deep, hidden places. Chief Warlock Sindala was there, poring over maps of Gnomeregan.

"Chief?"

Sindala looked up.

"Ah, Griggin. Good you're here. We've got a bit of a situation. You see, quite a large number of troggs have shown up all at once and we're having a bit of trouble, well, killing them all. Could you see your way clear to applying yourself to this task?"

Griggin stared blankly.

"Where did they come from, Sir?"

"All over the place. It is a very well thought out attack, really. Started in the habitation area, and oil-slicked from there. Fighting has progressed in the direction of the industrial areas."

Griggin stared. Oh damn. Marvin would be there. He'd be slaughtered if the troggs found him. Marvin would probably not be overjoyed to see him, but there was an important difference between being angry and being dead. Marvin had saved him from bankruptcy when he needed it most. Griggin owed him. He shook himself.

"Right. Heading to the industrial estate."

Griggin approached the small workshop. It hadn't been easy to get here, either. Hurzag stood behind him, arms crossed, saying nothing. Hurzag was under orders to slay anything that attacked Griggin. Griggin tried the door to the workshop, and it opened. He walked into the shop and shouted Marvin's name. No response. He looked round the shop, which looked uncommonly tidy to him. It had been a complete shambles when Griggin first met Marvin, and one of the more useful things he'd done for him was to order

things a bit. Griggin immediately spotted that several of the more expensive tools were gone. On the workbench was a large white envelope, with Marvin's handwriting on it. "To Whom It May Concern", it said. Griggin reasoned that he was quite concerned, and opened the envelope.

To whom it may concern.

By the time you read this, I will be long gone. I am sick to my stomach of the commercial environment and will pursue happiness elsewhere. Find enclosed the operating principles to the Optimal Prime line of water pumps and heaters, in the possibly vain hope that you will be content with this and leave me alone.

Marvin Sprocket

Griggin leafed through the sheets of paper. They were covered with alchemical formulae, drawings, lists of components, which crystals to use... in characteristic Marvin Sprocket style. It would take even Griggin hours

to decrypt this. Any of the Macehandle lot would take years. Griggin sneered. Perhaps, that was the point. Marvin needed his headstart. Griggin sighed, and pocketed the envelope.

"Light speed, Marvin Sprocket. Well Hurzag. Nothing more to find here. Let's go."

"I obey," said Hurzag.

Vernon Sparkmantle ran from hiding place to hiding place, with Bieslook hidden under his cloak. Her little arms were wrapped tightly round. and her head was on his shoulder. He was making for the exit. Wherever you looked, there were Troggs. They were anthropomorphic, he supposed. Arms, legs, one head each. They slouched, and most of them were sufficiently advanced to wrap their minds around the operation principles of, say, a club made of bone. This must be their big push, and things looked bad. *First*, get Bieslook safe in either Kharanos, Brewnall or some other such place. Then, he'd turn round and fight. Joining his fellow mages in the Gnomeregan Centre of Magecraft was out of the question. Too many enemies between him and it. He could take on ten, maybe twelve in one go. There were dozens of them.

He ran through a place where Troggs had already been, and pulled his cloak over Bieslook's head. He didn't want her to see. Corpses littered the floor, some of them Troggs, most of them Gnomes. He wished he could pull his cloak over his own head as well. One of the creatures was poking at the dead body of a Gnome woman, looking for the Light knew what. Vernon's jaw set. He pointed his staff forward, and the familiar spells came as easily to him as they ever had. Bright shining arrows of arcane energy sped towards the Trogg. The creature bellowed, died. With tears in his eyes, Vernon ran on. Nothing he could do for the fallen. He looked at Bieslook's face. Just keep this one safe.

"Papa?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Are you scared?"

Vernon sighed, sat down and put Bieslook on his knee.

"A little, dear. We're playing hide and seek with people who cheat."

"They were poking people while they were asleep."

"Yes, dear. They're not nice."

"Asleep like Mama."

Vernon closed his eyes. Wouldn't it be wonderful if children didn't understand quite so much?

"Yes."

"I don't want to play this game anymore, papa."

"Once we get to the big elevator, we're done, sweetheart."

They reached the Hall of Gears, without attracting too much attention to themselves. Vernon stopped in the hallway. Get through the Hall, up the corridors to the vast dormitories used by the industrial workers, then up, up and out. There was a problem. All through the Hall of Gears, creatures squelched. Vernon watched them in horrid fascination. They were a transparent green, like the dessert that Bieslook enjoyed so much. They slid along the floor, without legs, like monstrous slugs, heads bobbing back and forth. In their jelly-like heads, Vernon could see skulls. He gripped his staff tightly, and clutched his daughter to him.

"Oozes," said Bieslook, wriggling in his arm.

"Yes," said Vernon. "Let's see if we can reach the other hallway."

Trying to walk as quietly as possible, Vernon walked out into the Hall of Gears. He stuck close to the wall, and reached the other corridor, thankfully, without disturbing any of the oozes. In the corridor were a few sentries, wearing helmets that hid their faces. They were looking out into the Hall, weapons in their hands.

"Morning Sir," said one of the sentries. "Just move along here. Any news?"

"Troggs," said Vernon, curtly. "Lots of them. Got to get my daughter to safety, and then I'll see what I can do."

The sentry smiled at Bieslook behind the visor of his helm.

"Hello little girl. Out for a stroll with your daddy then?"

"Playing hide and seek," said Bieslook. "For real. Troggs want to eat us."

"Well, you just do what your daddy says, and everything will be alright." The sentry turned to Vernon. "Dormitories should still be clear. At least, we haven't had any bad news from there."

Vernon only nodded.

"Light help us all," he said. "Come along, Bieslook."

Griggin completed his spell. Fiery stones stopped falling from above on a group of Troggs. Hurzag glided back to his side. A grim expression was on Griggin's face. It had been a while since he'd expended so much energy. There were things he could do, involving Hurzag's demonic energy, but he decided to wait a bit. Trading with demons usually involved pain. He shook himself, and ran up the corridor to the Hall of Gears, followed by his Voidwalker.

Griggin was on his way out. He'd managed to make his way back to the meeting place of Warlocks, to find Chief Warlock Sindala gone. The place was mostly empty of the equipment, papers presumably hidden in one of the vaults. Normal service would be restored after this bloody invasion. Griggin didn't care anymore. All he wanted was to be back with his family. This whole trek back into Gnomeregan had turned out to be a complete waste of time, and a dangerous one at that. He sighed. Something was wrong with the quality of his decisions lately. Marvin was right. He should have notified the authorities as soon as he'd noticed his employer had vanished. The Gnomeregan Guards might not like Warlocks much, but that didn't mean they would just allow people to be abducted. Though it

occurred to him that if he'd waited for the authorities, Marvin might have been dead or wishing he were.

Griggin took a deep breath. There were strange acid smells in the air. Well, stranger than usual for this place. He searched his mind for things that smelled like that, but came up with nothing. He scratched his head, and got himself going again. No use standing here dithering.

When Griggin reached the end of the tunnel, he stopped, staring into the Hall of Gears. The place was one mess of green, squelching ooze. These oozes were normally found just where you wouldn't find Gnomes. Places with high residual magic energy. Places with high radiation levels. Places that could kill you. Last time he looked, the Hall of Gears was not one of such places. Griggin was low on mana. He swore under his breath. Another stupid mistake. He should have brought potions. What was wrong with him these days? He closed his eyes, and shook his head. Nothing for it. Steeling himself against the pain, he cast a Warlock spell. It drew from his life force, and gave him mana. Normally when you did things like this, you had a healer standing by to repair the damage you did to

yourself. Luxury. Here we go.

Hurzag hurled himself against all the gathered oozes, while Griggin blasted them with shadow magic. He staggered into the next hallway that the oozes for some reason were not willing to squelch into. Griggin didn't care why. He took deep breaths. He'd had one lucky break. One of the oozes had apparently devoured some unlucky soul before he could drink a healing potion. Griggin, glad of whatever opportunity presented itself, had picked it up from the dead puddle of green slime on the floor. He cleaned the top of the square bottle as well as he could, then drank the potion in one long, slow draught. It gave him dizzy spells as his abused body did the healing work of months in one minute. Still, he was able to continue. Healing potions were never meant for subtle work. They got you back in fighting shape, quick. Hurzag, meanwhile, lurked in the shadows, restoring himself using his Demonic abilities.

"Keep moving, Hurzag."

"Yes."

Griggin and his Voidwalker ran up the corridor. He grinned. Ah. The tunnel defenders were still holding their ground. Good. He walked up to one of them.

"How are you, Gentlemen?"

The sentry faced Griggin. The helm he was wearing hid his face. It made his voice sound hollow, as he shouted.

"Incoming! Another one of those filthy Troggs! You have no chance to survive!"

Griggin looked over his shoulder, twisting round, hands raised for shooting. He was knocked over from behind, and sprawled on his face. Hurzag responded immediately. With one blow of his giant blue fist, he knocked the defender back. Griggin leaped to his feet. Hurzag was now fighting several of the Gnomish tunnel defenders. Griggin raised his hands, hesitating. They were clearly delusional. Hallucinating. What had happened to them? They would kill him unless he killed them first. Had he the *right*? Griggin took a deep breath, and screamed, a wordless cry of misery, anger. Anger at the world. Anger at himself. He raised his arms to the roof of the caverns where he'd lived all his life, and called forth his magic and his anger. Then, he unleashed it on those who would destroy him. He would sort out the morality of it later. His only desire was to return to his wife, his son and daughter. All other things were unimportant. He did not even look at the burnt corpses of the tunnel defenders as he ran along

the corridor, up to the workers' dormitories.

Vernon Sparkmantle slammed the dormitory door behind him, and rammed the bolts home. Then, he turned to the few Troggs that were already in the room with him. He pushed Bieslook behind a table, told her to stay there with a look and rushed out into the middle of the room. Troggs attacked him, but Vernon's magical armour softened the blows, froze their limbs. He raised his staff, and shouted. A brilliant dome of light formed about him, and the Troggs cried out, then fell lifeless to the ground. Vernon stood in the middle of the room, shaking. Safe for now. The temporary aspect of that was emphasised by the sound of Troggs' fists banging on the door outside. Vernon watched the door. It was shaking only a little, but it was shaking. He turned to Bieslook.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?"

Bieslook looked up into her father's eyes.

"Are the Troggs going to win, papa?"

Vernon put his hand on Bieslook's small head.

"Not while I can stop them."

The banging on the door was heavier now. Perhaps they had brought a battering ram of some description. They knew he was in here. As Vernon watched the door, he could now clearly see it move. Outside, he could hear the panicked metallic voices of the automated sentries that roamed the place. Occasionally, they detonated, killing or wounding one, maybe two Troggs. They had not been designed for this level of hostility. He looked at the door again. It was only a matter of time. They would come in. They would kill him. They would kill Bieslook. Vernon closed his eyes. He had always known that Bieslook would, one day, follow in his footsteps as a mage. Already she could see the flow of energy that was part and parcel of Magecraft. She thought it was pretty. What he was going to do now, was against everything he believed in, but he had no choice. It was all he could do to give her a chance, however small.

"Bieslook? Close your eyes, dear. Papa is going to teach you something, for when you are afraid."

He closed his eyes for a second, then planted the deadly knowledge within a child far, far too young to use it properly. If the girl would use it more than perhaps three times in a row, she'd kill herself. If she

didn't use it once, others would kill her. Vernon bit back the tears, and taught young Bieslook another spell, the dome of light he'd just used to clear this room.

"There. Now you must be very careful when you use them, sweetheart. Not use it too often. But when the bad Troggs come to get you, *then* you use it to blow them away."

Vernon put his arms round Bieslook, and held her tightly, as if he would never let her go again.

"Now Papa is going to take care of the Troggs outside. When they are gone, go up, up and away. Find other Gnomes."

"Are you going away, Papa?"

"I have to, Sweetheart. I have to draw the Troggs away from you. Remember, Bieslook. Papa loves you very, very much. Now hide. Don't let anyone see you."

Bieslook crawled under one of the beds in the dormitory, and Vernon gathered up his power. All of it. No point holding any back. His skin crackled with it, his hair stood up, and almost he felt his feet weren't touching the ground anymore. The staff in his right hand hummed. This was a spell that they did not teach to anyone, not even the greatest Mages that visited. They called it Divine Wind. There would never be a

more destructive spell in all the world. He walked up to the door, and pointed a finger at the bolts. They glowed first, then melted. The door opened with a bang, tossing Troggs back. Vernon cried out, and blinked. In a splintered second, his body disappeared, then re-appeared in the middle of the dormitory. There were about a hundred Troggs in the room, or maybe a hundred and fifty. Vernon laughed.

"Is that all? Call your friends! Let them all come!" Then, he closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Iris. I am so sorry."

All round him, Troggs' fists began to batter his magical shields. Vernon opened his eyes and glared at them. He took a final deep breath, raised his staff. He cried out in a booming voice.

"For Gnomeregan! Ten Thousand Years!"

The world went white.

Griggin ran. He'd left the bewildered guards behind, and ran through the lower part of the corridor, where normally great carts of equipment rolled to the Hall of Gears. Hurzag followed him close. Only a few more corridors to the Dormitory. He peered ahead.

As he watched, there was a fierce, white light in front of him. Two, three seconds later, the noise hit him. Griggin dropped to his stomach on the floor, put his hands over his head and screwed his eyes shut. Heat burned his back as the blast wave washed over him, then disappeared. He looked up. A few yards further, Hurzag was taking deep breaths of darkness, restoring.

"What in the world was *that*? Haven't we had enough yet?"

Hurzag made no reply. Griggin leapt to his feet, nursing his scorched back, then moved forward again, a determined look on his face. He rounded one corner, then another. The corridors were empty, swept clean by... whatever it was. Griggin ran forward. The dormitories were clean. Empty. There wasn't even any smoke. No bodies. Nothing.

"Anybody here?"

From one of the side-rooms, there was a terrified scream. Griggin didn't hesitate a moment.

"Hurzag! Get in there! Slay all enemies!"

"I obey," said Hurzag, and glided to the door, and through it, followed by Griggin. There was another scream, and Griggin's eyes opened wide. With inspired speed, he jumped to the side of the door, as a

monstrous stream of fire poured out of the dormitory, flew all across the hall, and smashed into the opposite wall. Hurzag cried out, shimmered and disappeared. Griggin looked up as the noise abated. The only thing he could hear now were the small sobs of a young girl, crying.

"Uh... hello? Can I come in?"

Making sure that he could leap aside at a moment's notice, he walked into the dorm room. The quiet sobs could still be heard, coming from under one of the beds. He looked, to find the small form of a very young girl, four years, five at most. Very carefully, Griggin put his hand on the girl's shoulder. She looked round to him.

"Papa?"

Griggin sighed, shook his head.

"I'm not your papa. Are you hurt?"

"Head hurts. Ow."

"Come out here. I'm Griggin. What's your name?"

He half dragged the girl out from under the bed and put her on his knee, gently jiggling her up and down, like he'd done with Trixie, so many years ago, making soothing noises. He produced his handkerchief and

wiped the girl's face.

"Papa is gone to sleep," she said.

Griggin stood waiting for the large elevator to come down, with Bieslook's little hand in his. She had stopped crying, and was looking ahead with big dark eyes in her pale face. The elevator came down and Griggin and Bieslook stepped on. It reached the top, and they walked out together. Outside, the sky was blue, and they stood for a few moments, looking at the lands of Dun Morogh stretching out in front of them. Griggin knelt in front of the little girl.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

Griggin smiled, pulled a small paper bag from his pocket and rattled it in front of Bieslook. She looked at him.

"Papa says I mustn't take candy from strangers."

Griggin nodded. "Your papa is right. So who can you take candy from?"

"Only from Papa, or people I know."

"Hmm," said Griggin. "How long before you get to know me well enough?"

Bieslook studied Griggin's face.

"Don't know."

Griggin put the bag of sweeties back in his pocket, and ruffled Bieslook's hair.

"Let's go to Brawnall. Get something proper to eat. You *can* take that, can't you?"

"Yes. Finish everything on your plate."

Griggin laughed. He turned round and held out his arms.

"Want a ride?"

Bieslook got on. Griggin set off in the direction of Brawnall Village.

File GSB-045: Redemption

Griggin didn't notice Bieslook looking up at him. They were walking side by side on the way from Brawnall Village to Kharanos. Griggin's face was grim. He was not pleased with his own performance, and that always made him irritable. He sighed.

"Why are you sad, Griggin?"

Griggin looked down on Bieslook, smiling.

"What makes you think I'm sad?"

"Your face. Are you all alone?"

"Oh my, no. I have a wife. I have two children."

"Are they in Khanos?"

"Kha-ra-nos," said Griggin. "I don't think so. I told them to go to Ironforge if I didn't show up in a day."

Bieslook looked at the ground.

"Sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"I walk too slow."

Griggin laughed. "Don't be sorry. You're walking very well, actually. If you keep it up, we'll be in Kharanos

before night."

"Are there Dwarves in Kharanos?"

"Oh yes. There are many Dwarves there."

"Papa says they fight all day and drink beer all night."

"Oh I'm sure they do more than that. They have to eat and sleep sometime."

"I had Papa's beer once. It made my head feel funny and Papa shouted at me. Then I was sick."

"It's a grown-up drink," said Griggin.

Bieslook stepped on next to Griggin, saying nothing for a while, looking at the snowy ground in front of her feet.

"Do you drink beer?"

"Now and then. I much prefer strong coffee to strong beer."

Griggin stared at the snowy mountains ahead.

Sometimes inexperienced Warlocks tried to silence the demon voices in their heads by drinking. It never worked. If you drank too little, you merely weakened your defences, which allowed demons to run free in your head. If you drank too much, it only gave you a few moments' respite, before it led to the whole range of problems all heavy drinkers have, *and* you'd have

demons egging you on to destroy yourself. Demons were quite happy to serve a Warlock too weak to summon them. It was one of the preferred ways to avoid being summoned.

"Beer makes you stupid," said Bieslook.

Griggin nodded. "That is correct. Too much beer makes you very stupid indeed."

"Can't you have beer that doesn't make you stupid?"

Griggin laughed. "Well, I think you can, but that tastes like a horse already drank it once."

Bieslook looked at Griggin, an expression of outrage on her face. "They give it to *horses*? That's mean!"

Griggin opened his mouth to start to explain the joke. He looked at the little girl walking next to him, realising he'd have to watch his jokes a bit around little Bieslook.

"True. That's why I never touch the stuff. I believe in inebriation without cruelty."

Griggin arrived in Kharanos with Bieslook asleep riding on his back. Probably best to stop here for the night. If he'd been alone, he would have pressed on to Ironforge at once. With this little girl along, that was impractical. He needed to be with Lenna and Nix and

Trixie. Griggin walked up to the tavern in the Thunderbrew Distillery and waved at the Dwarf behind the counter, who was drying tankards and glasses.

"Good evening, Sir," said Griggin, in his best Common. "Do you have a room for two?"

"Ach, no lad," said the Dwarf. "We've been having lots of ye Gnomes, and I'm booked solid. I hear something bad has happened in Gnomeregan."

"Invasion of Troggs," said Griggin. "Big one. Hope the militia is on top of it."

The inkeeper put the beer mug back on the spike behind him with the others, then turned back round to Griggin.

"Didn't ye hear? They stopped the invasion alright. Some wee bunch of jobbies set off a big nasty bomb in the middle of town. One of those things that burns ye all the way through without fire. Stopped the invasion alright, but it also killed a load of the good Gnomes."

Griggin could only stare.

"Who... who would do such a thing?"

The barman took another mug out of the bowl and started drying it.

"Some Gnome by the name of, let me think...
Mekka... Mekkathingy."

"*Mekkatorque*? Do you mean to say that Gelbin Mekkatorque set off a radiation bomb in the middle of town?"

"That's the one."

Griggin found he was standing there with his mouth hanging open, and closed it. He shook his head.

"I don't believe it. Nobody in his right mind would set off a weapon of mass destruction in his own town!"

"Well, then perhaps he *wasn't* in his right mind. It's what everybody keeps saying who passes though here."

Griggin shook himself. There were more important things than possibly erroneous messages from Gnomeregan. He looked down at Bieslook, who was tugging at his sleeve.

"What is it?"

"Have to go poo," said Bieslook.

"Ah." Griggin looked up at the bar Dwarf. "Where are the, um, facilities?"

"Cludgie's oot the back. Yer in luck, I just added paper."

"Deep joy," muttered Griggin. They had celebrated the day that Trixie first disposed of her duties properly with cakes with pink icing. He sighed. Here we go again.

Griggin was standing in the snow, Bieslook next to him, negotiating with a Gnomish mechanostrider merchant over the price of a second-hand one. The Mechanostrider was one of the great inventions of the Gnomish Engineers. It looked vaguely like a flightless bird, and could carry a Gnome at speeds up to thirty miles per hour. Griggin liked them. They didn't contain especially complicated technology, but a lot of the ingenuity had gone into details like, oh, adjusting the gyroscopes so as not to have them fall flat on their beaks. Coordinating the motion of their two legs to account for changes in terrain. Good solid engineering grindwork. Trial and error and slow but steady progress. If he could afford it, he'd be able to make it to Ironforge before tomorrow. He had the covers open, and peered at the engine.

"Sixty silver," said Griggin.

"No," said the merchant.

Griggin pointed. "Those packings are going to have to be replaced sometime in the next three-hundred miles. Also, it's the low-power model."

"Eighty," said the merchant. "This is a classic. Fix her up and you can sell it for a mint to a collector."

"A relic, you mean. It's only of any value to masochists. I just need it to take me to Ironforge."

Griggin sneered. These striders weren't very popular even when they were new, and known in Gnomish as Truttenschudders. "Alright. Sixty-five."

"Seventy, and I'll fill her up for you."

"Done."

Griggin counted out his money, and was given the control box. He pressed the button, and the strider sputtered to life. With some apprehension, Griggin got on, and pulled Bieslook in front of him. He turned on the headlamps.

"Pleasure doing business, Sir," said the merchant.

Griggin only nodded. He kicked the strider into gear, and it trotted off in the direction of Ironforge, its metal feet clunking on the bridge.

"Bieslook? Warn me if you see any road signs for Ironforge."

"What's a road sign?"

The Mechanostrider clunked its way noisily through the night on the road to Ironforge. Bieslook had loved the ride, watching the trees and bears and panthers whizz by. Finally, despite the rough ride, she'd fallen asleep between Griggin's arms. Griggin looked down on her face, pale in the moonlight, eyes closed, peaceful. He sighed. How many more orphans would come out of this war? He still couldn't believe it.

Gnomeregan, such as he knew it, was gone. It was too much to contemplate. His old house, the taverns where he'd discussed coffee with the barkeep, the little shop of horrors where he'd produced the water heaters with Marvin, all turned to glowing radio-active waste. By, of all people, Gelbin Mekkatorque, the Gnomes' High Tinker. Up to now, Mekkatorque's reputation was beyond reproach. He should have known better. He *did* know better. Then why?

Griggin sighed, and steered the strider round a bend in the road. The controls had too much give in them. He had to *really* persuade it to go round corners. It needed a bit of tender loving care. Taking apart, cleaning, putting back together again, corroded parts replaced, a

bit of a polish, to bring it back to its former glory, such as it was. This model was the first one to include the then-revolutionary Variomatic transmission. Even the strider they'd put in front of the cart had something better now. One of the nice quirks was that it could go as fast backward as it could go forward. These things had dominated the All-Gnomeregan Backwards Races, where idiots raced their striders in reverse. It made a grinding sound and Bieslook stirred. Alternatively, it needed a brief flight off the edge of a sufficiently high mountain. There was a reason he'd only had to pay seventy silver for it. All it had to do was take him to Ironforge. Back to Lenna. If it could just do that, he'd reward it with some nice new engine oil.

Griggin parked his strider and collapsed it in front of the Stonefire Tavern in Ironforge. Bieslook was still asleep in his arms, though she was probably about to wake up. He carefully deposited her on a bench and put his cloak over her. Then, he walked up to the bar.

"Good morning. I need a jug of really *really* strong coffee. I've been riding all night."

The Dwarf laughed, and turned round to the coffee jug. Griggin waved a hand.

"Stronger than that. Engineer strength, please."

"Ye gods! Ye don't think I know my stuff?"

Griggin didn't feel like arguing, and accepted a mug of coffee. He tasted, and gave the Dwarf a mournful look. The Dwarf didn't even notice. Oh well. They still had the DE2000. Griggin closed his eyes. If they'd got here already and nothing bad had happened to them. What in the world had possessed him to leave them?

Next to him Bieslook stirred, and suddenly sat up.

"Papa?"

Griggin turned round. "Yes, dear?"

Bieslook *looked* at Griggin. "You're not my Papa," she said in that wonderful, beautifully clear voice that all young children have. Then she burst out in tears. "I want my Papa."

All round the tavern, Dwarves were looking at Griggin, not saying anything, mind, just observing. I'm sure everything is all in order. Griggin looked at Bieslook, who was wailing at full lung strength, face to the wall. Griggin gently picked her up, held her to him. Put his hand on her hair. Closed his eyes.

"Your papa had to go, sweetheart. He's not here anymore. But I am."

There was a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up to see the barkeep standing over him. In his other hand was a banana.

"For the wee bairn," he said.

Griggin smiled and offered the fruit to Bieslook, who took it. The wails of anguish subsided into quiet sobbing. Griggin pulled out a handkerchief and wiped Bieslook's nose.

"Now what do we say to the nice Dwarf?"

"Thank you."

The barman grinned. "Yer welcome."

Griggin looked up. "Refugee. Her father was... lost in Gnomeregan."

"Ye hear a lot of that these last few days. Best of luck to ye."

Bieslook's hand felt warm in Griggin's, as they walked towards the part of Ironforge called the Commons. Bieslook had put away her banana at a remarkable speed, and devoured a bowl of porridge. Some of the colour had returned to her face.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Griggin.

"Yes," said Bieslook. "Thank you," she added.

Griggin laughed and went to his knees in front of her.

"You're welcome. Now. We need to find my wife. She should be somewhere in this city. Her name is Lenna." He sighed. "Now how am I going to find her in this place?"

Bieslook looked round. Before she could speak, someone called Griggin's name, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him to her, head on his shoulder, gently shaking, not saying anything.

Griggin put his arms round Lenna.

"Well, that was easy," he said.

"I've found us a place to live," said Lenna. "Lucky to get it, too. Rode into the place, Saw the 'for rent' sign up, went for it and done. I think nobody wants this because it's too noisy." Lenna looked at her husband with glowing eyes. "It's got only two rooms, but it's got very high ceilings."

"Oh. I'm forgetting my manners," said Griggin. "Meet this young lady. Her name is Bieslook."

Lenna chuckled, looking down at the girl.

"Griggin Steambender. We're only apart for two days, and already you trade me in on someone younger and

prettier?"

"Yes," said Griggin, "And quite shamelessly so. I found her in Gnomeregan. She's lost her family, so I took her with me."

Lenna went to one knee, and looked into Bieslook's eyes, a friendly smile on her face.

"Hello Bieslook. I'm Lenna, Griggin's wife. Has he been treating you well?"

"Yes, Miss," said Bieslook. "I rode on the strider. We saw bears, but they couldn't run as fast as we could."

Lenna's eyes turned to Griggin.

"Bears?"

"Some polar bears in Dun Morogh. Nothing to worry about."

"They'd already eaten someone else," said Bieslook, "So they weren't hungry and just wanted to play."

"I see," said Lenna. "Griggin, does she have any family left?"

"I don't know," said Griggin. "I fear the worst for her father. I suspect he cast some kind of sacrificial spell to clear the room they were in. I don't know if she has any more family."

Lenna looked at Bieslook. Poor girl.

"What's your father's name?"

"Papa," said Bieslook.

"I know, but what do the other Gnomes call him?"

What's your last name?"

"Bieslook Sparkmantle, at your service."

Lenna laughed. "Lenna Steambender, at yours." She took a breath. "Sparkmantle. Hold on. Is your papa called Vernon?"

Bieslook nodded.

"You're Vernon Sparkmantle's little girl? Oh my."

Griggin frowned. "You know her father?"

"Of course I do. He was one of the Mage trainers in Gnomeregan." She looked up at Griggin. "He taught me how to do an Arcane Explosion. He used to be a battle mage, until his wife Iris died. He blamed himself, so after that, he would only teach, not do himself."

Lenna put her hand on Bieslook's head, stroking her dark hair.

"You're coming with me. I bet you're hungry. Griggin hasn't fed you, has he?"

Bieslook frowned. "Got a bananana."

"Well, let's see what we can do."

Griggin walked into the door, to be greeted by shouts of delight from Nix and Trixie. Trixie leaped at Griggin, and head-butted his chest.

"Dad! Can I have the top bunk now? Nix always has the top bunk. It's my turn."

"Well, I made it," said Nix. "I'm not having you drop on me in the night. I didn't dimension it for someone your weight."

Trixie whirled round and kicked Nix soundly in the shins.

"You'll take that back, Nix Steambender."

Griggin shook his head.

"Son, do I really have to come home for the first time to find you have not over-dimensioned an essential element of the house infrastructure properly? A top bunk should be able to hold at least *three* Gnomes of normal stature, if not four."

"Oh yes, Dad, but I'd have to over-dimension it at least ten-fold to allow for *ow!*"

"I can kick harder than that, Bro."

Bieslook tugged Griggin's sleeve.

"Are they fighting because they are in a Dwarf town?"

Griggin gave Bieslook a quick look, then took a deep breath and shouted.

"Quiet down, everyone! We have a guest. Everybody, meet Bieslook Sparkmantle. She's going to stay with us until we can find her family."

Only now did Trixie and Nix notice the small girl standing close to Griggin. They looked at each other for a few moments. Trixie grinned and punched the air.

"Yes! Three girls, two boys. That means girls rule!"

"Dad! Do something!"

The old table was slightly too large for the room they had put it in, but they had crammed it in somehow. Nix and Trixie were sitting at it with the new addition to the family. Griggin and Lenna had wandered off to the Gnomeregan authorities in exile, to register their presence here, and Bieslook's.

"So," said Trixie. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Nix groaned. "Trix, how much did you like answering that when you were her age?"

"Most stupid question in the world," said Trixie. "And now it's my turn to ask it."

"I want to be a Mage," said Bieslook. "Like Papa."

"Cool," said Nix. "Our mum is a Mage. She can shoot fire like nobody's business."

Bieslook nodded. "I can shoot fire."

"You? Oh come on. You're way too young to do *that!* They don't let you until you're much older."

"Papa taught me."

Nix shook his head.

"No way. Girls your age can't shoot firebolts."

Bieslook sniffed. "Can too!"

Trixie reached behind her, into the kitchen, and grabbed the coffee jug. She refilled her cup.

"Look cutie, it's not like we don't want to believe you." She added some sugar to her cup. "But we don't."

"Papa taught me," said Bieslook. "Can show you."

Nix grinned. "Oh alright. Watch where you point those hands, though. I like my eyebrows. Shoot out of the window."

Bieslook got up.

"Oh this should be good," said Trixie.

"Well," said Griggin, "we've arrived. Amazing really, how they didn't even want the forms in triplicate."

"It's the war," said Lenna. "They're shell-shocked. Makes them go soft."

"Possibly," said Griggin.

They reached their new house. Griggin looked at it. For a Dwarf, it was far too small. It had probably been someone's office at some point. They had to walk up a few stairs to get to it. It looked out on the Commons, and was quite near the tavern. There was a constant coming and going of travellers. Most travellers being Dwarves, this meant constant shouting, the march of iron-shod feet and the roar of engines. No matter. Griggin could sleep through anything. He was swaying on his feet. He put his arm round Lenna.

"So. What do you think of our new arrival?"

Lenna put her head on Griggin's shoulder.

"She's adorable. Vernon was a good man. I'm sure she won't be any trouble. Vernon had a brother named Magis. I'm told he's making for Ironforge as well. When he does, I'll ask him what to do."

"And until then, we can keep her warm, clean and fed," said Griggin. "Remember when Trixie was her age?"

"Our young Warrior princess," said Lenna. "They grow up so fast."

Griggin frowned.

"Can you smell something?"

Lenna looked round the room. The cloud of smoke had dissipated, leaving only a persistent smell. The expression on her face meant Trouble. Big Trouble. Her offspring were standing in front of her with big, startled eyes.

"Why, if I may ask, is there *coffee* all over the curtains?"

Trixie swallowed.

"It's the first thing I got to hand to put them out."

"Put them out?"

"They were on fire," said Nix.

Lenna looked at her son, her face carved in stone.

"On fire. How did they come to be on fire?"

Nix looked at Trixie. Trixie looked at Nix. At the exact same moment, they pointed. Bieslook was sitting on the lower bunk bed, whimpering quietly with her head in her hands.

"Ow. Head hurts."

Griggin lay in bed, cuddled up behind Lenna. He had his arms round her. The children were already asleep, including Bieslook, who'd had some soothing willow bark tea for her headache and fallen asleep on the sofa. Nix had already drawn up plans for a third bunk in the large room and kitchen. What the place lacked in floor surface, it more than made up for in height. It would do. Griggin pulled Lenna a bit closer.

"I missed you."

"Me too," said Lenna. "Let's not split up again for a while."

"Good plan. Tomorrow, I'll start looking for a job. And I still have to plumb in the appliances."

"Good luck," murmured Lenna. "They don't have steam or hot water connections in this place."

"What? That's ridiculous. What are they, cave-dwellers? Do they bang rocks together to make the flames come?"

"Probably," said Lenna. She pulled Griggin's arm a bit closer and sighed. "They do things differently here."

Outside, a company of Dwarves arrived in the city. They blew their trumpets, announced themselves, then stomped off.

"Well, in that case it's high time that we dragged them kicking and screaming into Modern Days. Do they even know what showers are?"

Lenna laughed. "They bathe in ale. They may expect you to do the same, just to fit in."

Griggin chuckled. "Well, let's start with hot and cold running water. I have Marvin's designs for the Optimal Prime. It'll take me a while to decypher, but then... Ironforge will never smell the same again!"

"Good," said Lenna. "I'm sure we will settle in here. Isn't it strange? We were probably the first refugees out of Gnomeregan. There'll be more before too long, I just know it. We got so lucky getting this place. I almost feel we don't deserve it."

Griggin's fingers moved slowly on Lenna's stomach.

"A new chance. A fresh start. We have to set a good example for Bieslook. She may be the most important thing to come out of Gnomeregan with us."

"The poor girl. I can understand why Vernon taught her the spells she knows, but she is so young. There's going to be Rules about using them. With the first one being Don't. It gives her such headaches." Lenna looked over her shoulder. "It could kill her if she tries too many times."

Griggin nodded quietly. "My love, you know I'm not a religious man, but still, I believe this girl is a gift. She is innocent, even though there has been sadness in her life. We must protect that innocence at all costs, as long as she is with us."

"Aww... Does that mean not making disquieting noises in the night?"

Griggin chuckled.

"How much willow bark was in that tea?"

Lenna grinned in the dark.

"Lots."

File GSB-051: Progress

King Magni Bronzebeard of Ironforge looked down on the Gnomes in front of him. Since the unpleasant events in Gnomeregan last year, there had been a steady influx of Gnomes into the city. On the whole, King Magni liked them. They were a small, but industrious people. He had given them a relatively unimportant section of the great circle of Ironforge, and they had renamed it Tinker Town and filled it up with more outlandish machines than he could imagine. Gelbin Mekkatorque, High Tinker of all Gnomes, had set himself up there. Magni and Gelbin had spoken of the destruction of Gnomeregan. Going on the counsel of his advisor, though Gnomes had a different name for it, he had set fire to the entire city. It was a strange fire, though, because it only destroyed flesh and bones and left buildings standing. Time was, when a weapon was simply a sword, an extension of the wielder's arm. You could see it as it swept towards you and parry it. Magni hated all these new weapons that didn't give you a chance to fight back. The only thing worse than

adopting them was *not* adopting them and be slaughtered. Gelbin had unleashed one on his own town, friend and foe alike, reasoning and hoping that more foes than friends would perish. Magni did not envy Gelbin his decision, nor did he disapprove of it. In large wars such as these, it was often necessary to send fellow Dwarves and other people to their deaths for the good of the many. Gelbin Mekkatorque had been proven wrong by events. That was always a possibility. But he had made the decision. Predictably, people had commented on what Gelbin *should* have done, what was blindingly obvious he should have done and so on and so forth. People always did. They always forgot that they were sitting comfortably in a tavern or at home, with all the information they thought they needed, which in many cases was wrong anyway, while the King was at the spot, at that specific place in time and space where history was made. Of course, another thing people forgot, was that the decision *wasn't theirs to make*. It was the King's privilege, and the King's burden.

Most of Gnomish ingenuity these days was spent on their great combined engineering project: The Deeprun Tram. The tunnel was almost complete. People had

told Magni that you could already hear it if someone on the other end knocked on the last bit of wall with a hammer. The final bit was left up for a special ceremony, to which Magni would probably be invited. Possibly the Boy King of Stormwind would be there as well. It troubled Magni that these days, Stormwind was mostly ruled by advisors. Varian Wrynn might have been an obnoxious, vengeful man, but at least with him there, there was no ambiguity. His word was law. The Boy King was a figurehead, a symbol rather than a true political force.

Meanwhile, the Gnomes had pushed a cart into Magni's throne room and uncovered it as though they were showing him all the wonders of the world at once. As far as Magni could see, it contained a large tank and a machine of some description. It was probably some kind of weapon. Gnomes were remarkably good at those, and Gnomish inventors had even improved the Ironforge tanks in several ways. The Gnome bowed, and started to speak.

"Sire, when I entered this great city some two-hundred and three days ago, I was much impressed by the architecture, and the great works wrought by your stonemasons and builders. They have

no equal in the world. However, after a long day's work, a Gnome, and even a Dwarf I imagine, longs for a bit of comfort, as one cannot sleep on hard stone."

Magni's eyes gleamed. Yes you can. I did it, back in the days before Ironforge. We Dwarves are made of the stuff of the mountains. Or at least it feels that way after a night sleeping underground. That's why we invented the Pil-low and the Mat-tress.

"Personally," said the Gnome, "I find that the two things that call out to me at the end of the day, are a hot bath and a strong cup of coffee."

Well, to each his own, thought Magni. Give me a good deep tankard of strong ale and a few moments where nobody bothers me with stupid questions. Still, this meant that the thing on the cart was probably not a machine for killing hundreds of people at the same time, which was nice for a change.

"Both these things share one requirement. Hot water. And that is what my device is designed to provide in abundance. I present to you the Optimal Prime one-hundred and fifty water pump and boiler. Please Sire, observe. For this demonstration, we have connected a tank of normal drinking water. As you can see, the machine is autonomous and with only minor

maintenance will serve for decades on a single energy crystal."

The Gnome turned on the machine. It was quieter than usual for Gnomish devices. After a few moments, he turned a tap and filled a jug with steaming hot water.

"The Optimal Prime one-hundred and fifty has been designed as a domestic water heater, and will power a normal number of taps and a shower, as well as providing boiling water for tea and coffee making appliances. The five-hundred model is suitable for use in taverns or public bathing facilities, while our enterprise model, the Optimal Prime five-thousand, will easily provide for the needs of a barracks for about one hundred Dwarves. The machine can work either from a tank, like our demonstration model, or be fed from a spring or stream, with bio-filters to remove any unwanted material from the water source. Cold water, hot water or steam for cleaning purposes can all be provided."

King Magni ran a hand through his long beard, and nodded. A mischievous twinkle was in his eyes. He always liked to ask this of Gnomish engineers,

"Is it safe?"

The looks exchanged between the master engineer and his son were priceless. The engineer looked at him with an expression that tried very hard not to convey what a stupid question he'd just asked.

"Sire, every Optimal Prime water boiler is fitted with devices that prevent over-heating or excess pressure. When any such are detected, the machine will perform a safe shutdown, preventing accidents. The design complies with the most stringent of safety regulations."

King Magni nodded again. Well, this was only a glorified water kettle. It was so much more fun to ask this question when the device in question was a death ray designed to slay thousands.

"Thank you for your presentation, Sir," said Magni. "What is your request?"

"First, to present you with this boiler as a token of my appreciation, Sire. And further, to beg your permission to build these devices here, and to market them to the inhabitants of Ironforge."

The Gnome bowed politely, and so did his son, after a nearly invisible look from his father. King Magni inclined his head. This was probably harmless, and not every Gnome gave him presents that actually did something useful.

"Very well. It is my decision that our own engineers will see if it meets their expectations, and depending upon a favourable result, that you shall be allowed to market these devices as you see fit. For your gift, you have my thanks."

Griggin bowed deeply.

"I could have asked for no more, Sire. I will not disappoint you."

"Did you *have* to give him our home boiler, Dad?"

"Yes, I did. It doesn't pay to do these things half-way. Also, our name is on the device. So now, whenever the King shaves or washes, he will see it, to remind him that there is a Gnome out there who can help him with any hot-water-related problems he may have."

"Hmm," said Nix, clearly not convinced. "He doesn't look like he shaves much. And at the risk of insulting His Kingship, he doesn't look like he washes much either."

"Well, how is he supposed to if he has no hot water? Think of the diplomatic ramifications."

Just before they entered the tunnel that led to the commons, Griggin turned round to the lake of flowing

lava that was the Great Forge. Such heat. Such *power*. And all these Dwarves could think to do with it was to scoop up great metal buckets full of it and forge swords with it. It was practically crying out to have a major heat exchanger attached. Griggin grinned, machines, pumps, pipes springing into being in his mind. If, some day, King Magni would allow him to, he could bring warm water to every Dwarf in the place. He noticed Nix' hand on his arm.

"Come along Dad. Dinner time. Cold dinner, but dinner nonetheless."

"I wanted a two-hundred in the house anyway," said Griggin.

Nix and Griggin entered the door, to find the girls waiting for them at the table. Lenna put down a plate of sandwiches, and they attacked.

"How'd it go, dear?"

Griggin reached out for another cheese sandwich. "Well. If the Dwarves don't find any faults with my designs, and I see no reason why they should, then there will be Steambender-made water heaters all over Ironforge soon."

Lenna sniffed. "Well worth handing my hot bath to the King, then?"

"Don't worry, love. I have its replacement almost ready, and it'll be more powerful than the one we had. It'll power the coffee machine no problem. Next, I'll build an OP-5000. Time to show these Dwarves what our units can really do."

"Are you sure Marvin won't mind?"

Griggin thought about this, sandwich half-way to his mouth. He shook his head.

"Legally speaking, we produced the designs together, and I have as much right to exploit them as he does. He had the essential idea to power the boilers with Un'goro crystals, but I did most of the work on making them not blow up our customers. And in his final letter, he more or less placed the designs in the public domain." Griggin's eyes gleamed, and he took another bite of his sandwich. "All anyone has to do to obtain them is to ask me."

"Does everybody have to know what you're eating?"

Griggin stopped, looked at Bieslook, swallowed. He put his hand on her head.

"You're quite right, girl. Quite right. That was rude of me."

Lenna chuckled. "And after all that time I spent telling Bieslook not to talk with her mouth full. I'm ashamed of you, Griggin Steambender."

"Well, no coffee for me then. I'm off to the shop, to put the last few pipes onto the boiler. Coming with, Nix?"

Nix stuffed the last bit of sandwich into his face, opened his mouth to say something, looked at Bieslook and nodded.

"See? Young children do wonders for civilisation," said Lenna.

Nix turned up the pressure on the new pump, and looked at the gauges.

"Five-seventy five. I call this one tested."

"Right," said Griggin. "Shut her down. Once she cools down, we'll put her on the cart and tonight, there will be proper coffee again. How are the locks coming along?"

"Just about done, dad. Just tell me when to get the toy locks out and put the real ones in."

"Why don't you start on that now? It'll take at least half an hour before we can move the boiler."

Nix wandered over to the shop's doors, and started demolishing the locks. The present ones were about as effective as a sign on the door asking thieves please to go stealing elsewhere. The first time they had entered the place, Nix hadn't even bothered asking Griggin for the keys. The locks he was replacing them with, though, were of quite a different calibre, and would baffle all but the most competent of lockpickers. Which was good, because Griggin did not want anyone to steal his designs. He had great plans for them.

The shop was small, but functional. Two workbenches lined the north and south walls, while welding equipment and a small lathe were on the East wall. Tools were hung in neat rows above the workbenches. It had taken Nix and Griggin maybe a week to build it all. Now, with proper locks, they could put in some of the more expensive equipment. A miniature coffee maker (one of Nix' school projects) was on one of the benches. The workshop featured a number of taps, unusual in that they were fitted with pressure gauges and thermometers so they could connect one of their water boilers and observe its performance. This humble and comfortable place was where the Optimal Prime line of water boilers were

designed and built.

Griggin opened the lock-box, which was also a Nix Steambender original, and took out his most treasured blueprints. They consisted mostly of a very accurate map of the Great Forge and the fiery lake it was built on. Using a heat imaging device borrowed from one of the engineers in Tinker Town, he had made a rough estimate of the temperature at different places. It was impressive. According to the laws of physics, anyone crossing the bridge should be burnt to a crisp before they'd got half way, but Dwarven mages had told Physics to take a running jump and shielded Ironforge from the heat with magic spells that fed off the lake's heat itself and transferred it outside over a very large area. The Ironforge airstrip never froze over. Ingenious. Griggin had once tried to drop a thermometer in the fire. It had melted, even though it had been designed to measure the temperature in pottery kilns. He was still waiting for his order of a Titansteel thermocouple that could measure the heat of the Sun if that became necessary, let alone a mere lake of molten lava.

Titansteel featured heavily in his design for the giant hot water facility he had planned. According to his calculations, it could provide a city three times the size

of Ironforge with hot water forever. Griggin sighed, rolled up the blue sheet and carefully put it back in the strongbox. Perhaps this was all a pipe dream, no pun intended. It would require lots of drilling. Miles and miles of pipe. Huge pumps. He didn't even know if it could be done. But if it could... Oh well. We have to start small. From a drawer, he pulled the parts list to an OP-5000, and went over it once more. Time for another trip to the auction house.

"I assure you, Sir. The standards of hygiene in our establishment are the envy of all. Every room is cleaned *quite* thoroughly before the next guest is admitted."

"Ah, but how much time do your employees spend heating up water and transporting it in buckets?"

"That is not an issue, Sir. Our staff are quite able to clean a room in the time designated."

Griggin gave the Dwarf a polite nod.

"I do not doubt it, Mr. Smolt," he said. "From the evidence of my own eyes, your rooms are beyond reproach. Still, if I may ask. How might the cleaning process be hastened if there were a steady supply of

hot water to every room? Or even simply to the utility cupboards on each floor?"

One of Mr. Smolt's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch. His voice remained polite and friendly.

"Sir, are you suggesting that we run a number of unsightly pipes through our public areas merely for the convenience of the cleaning staff? That would not fit in with our priorities, which lie in the area of ambience."

Griggin shook his head. "By no means! It would be a great shame to spoil the charm of the decor with technology. I am firmly of the opinion that technology should be invisible to the eye, and silent to the ear. Let the users think that invisible fairies provide the hot water."

Mr. Smolt gave Griggin a little amused look.

"An illusion that must not be carried to the extreme, or we might upset a number of organisations who take to heart the well-being of magical creatures."

Griggin laughed politely. "The Light save us. I would propose that the necessary piping be routed through the service corridors that I notice running behind the customer accessible areas."

Griggin opened his bag and pulled out a floor plan of the Stonefire Tavern, rooms and all. He spread them

out on the table and pointed "The service corridors run parallel to the main customer access hallway. We can run a double pipe along its ceiling. The main feed can be routed through the dumbwaiter's shaft, though we may have to extend that a bit to allow normal operation of the dumbwaiter to continue. That way, we can route hot and cold water to every floor."

Mr. Smolt looked at Griggin's drawing, thoughtfully stroking his chin. He was clean-shaven, which was unusual for a Dwarf.

"I see. May I commend you on the thoroughness of your research? We do not generally divulge the internal workings of our services to the public."

"People say that a good preparation is half the work. I disagree. I would say that it is at least two-thirds."

Griggin thought it best not to mention that Nix had picked one of the locks to the service corridor, and had spent a very instructive few hours there with a tape measure and a notebook. They already knew how much pipe they would need.

"Indeed," said Mr. Smolt. "Still, this seems like a rather extensive investment, just for the convenience of the cleaning staff, who at any rate are well capable of disposing of their duties in the allocated time."

"Ah. Let me ask you this. I have been informed that you offer bathing facilities in your more exclusive rooms, for small groups."

Nix had been in one of these bath rooms, and had described something like a fabled place of wonders. Marble and plush, shining copper. Roughly the size of the whole of Steambender Manor.

The Dwarf nodded. "Indeed, we do Sir. Our clientele appreciates it."

"And with good reason. How is warm water provided to this bath?"

"The customer notifies us by means of the service bell, and we provide kettles of warm water."

"Ah. How long does this take to prepare?"

"Between twenty-four and twenty-eight minutes, Sir, depending on the temperature desired and the number of people who will be using the bath."

Griggin nodded. Nix had described a circular bath of about ten feet across, circumference therefore as near to thirty feet as makes no difference, five feet deep. He made some quick mental calculations.

"Our OP-5000 water pump could fill up that bath in about three minutes, with water of any temperature

between boiling and cold, without requiring the assistance of any of your staff." Griggin looked up at Mr. Smolt with a glint in his eyes. "Given the, shall we say, social aspects of these facilities, perhaps certain guests might prefer to make their own arrangements rather than involve any of your staff?"

Mr. Smolt actually smiled. It was a small, polite, corporate smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"I do believe you have a valid point there, Mr. Steambender. We do have a reputation for discretion at all times, but we can hardly expect our staff to enter the room blindfold. Let us assume for the moment that we would decide to install one of your appliances. How would we proceed?"

Griggin pointed at his floor plan.

"We would install the main unit in the kitchen, which is after all where boiling water is most needed. Mr. Stonehand can do the necessary stonework in the dumb-waiter shaft and the utility cupboards. We would run the main distribution pipe through here, and here, against the ceiling of the service corridor. Should you decide to let us do so, we can also install tap points in the rooms, by drilling here... and here, all along the service corridor. We could install basic hot and cold

running water, with shower facilities, at a rate of one room per day."

Mr. Smolt looked at the drawings, spread out over one of the tables, being kept from rolling up by strategically placed coffee cups.

"How much would this cost us?"

"Well," said Griggin, and named his price. Mr. Smolt didn't even blink.

"Very well, Mr. Steambender. I will discuss this with the manager."

Griggin blinked.

"You are not the manager?"

"Oh no, Sir. That would be Mr. Firebrew. I merely occupy the reception and provide services for our guests. Rest assured, though. I will convey your proposal to him. I am sure he will give it all due consideration. I will certainly recommend it. It is quite interesting."

"Well, you might have told me. I'm giving Bieslook a bath, so unless your customers want to look at a naked five-year-old, then I suggest you stow them somewhere till I'm done."

Griggin looked at Bieslook, who was sitting in among the bubbles with a happy grin on her face. She grabbed a handful of bubbles and blew them away.

"Are you clean yet, sweetheart?"

Bieslook raised a leg above the waterline.

"Feet very dirty," she said.

"Ah. I see. Well, keep scrubbing. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said Griggin. "The system is currently in use for paedohygienic purposes. Our demonstration will have to wait a little while. Meanwhile, could I offer you some coffee?"

Mr. Firebrew frowned at Griggin. "Pedawhat?"

Mr. Smolt's eyes wrinkled. "I believe a young member of the family is in the bath."

"Ach, the wee girl. I remember her. How is she?"

"She is coping amazingly well, thank you for asking. Children of her age are amazingly resilient. We are still trying to locate her family, but they are proving hard to find."

They were just about to have more coffee, when Lenna appeared, Bieslook on her arm.

"My apologies for the delay, gentlemen," she said.
"The bath is free."

"Oh I say," said Mr. Smolt. "That must be the cleanest child I ever saw. A resounding endorsement if ever I saw one."

"I washed behind my ears," said Bieslook.

"Really? May I see?"

Mr Smolt inspected Bieslook's ears.

"Well, Mr. Firebrew, not only are her ears spotless, they are also quite dry. Well done, young lady."

Bieslook grinned, and Lenna carried her into the other room. Griggin led the Dwarves into the space they had reserved for the bathing facilities.

"Right, gentlemen. This is the tap I was talking about. There are two spigots, one for hot, one for cold. Rather than have separate taps, this one mixes hot and cold water so that, rather than have one extremely hot point and another cold one, one can regulate the temperature of the water from freezing cold to scalding hot, like this."

Griggin turned the water from cold to hot. Steam rose from the bath as near-boiling water streamed into it. Mr. Firebrew gave his desk clerk a quick look.

"How hot does that get, Mr. Steambender?"

"Theoretically, we can provide water at boiling temperature, though that is seldom needed."

"That may be a wee problem," said Mr. Firebrew. "We don't want our guests to be burning themselves on the tap."

"Oh, but the taps are clearly marked, Mr. Firebrew. Red for hot, blue for cold. Mistakes are not likely to occur."

Mr. Smolt started to comment, but Mr. Firebrew waved a hand.

"Ye don't know what some of our guests are like, Mr. Steambender. We've been sued for not pointing out that tea is hot. I'll tell ye, putting boiling water in the hands of our guests is a disaster waitin' ta happen."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Smolt, "There is a way to limit the temperature of the water so that it cannot be made hot enough to scald anyone? Not all of our guests, I am happy to say, are litigously obtuse. I am thinking of children playing with the taps."

Griggin closed his eyes a moment, thinking. He smiled. Of course.

"That won't be a problem, gentlemen. I will make sure that the taps will have a maximum temperature output. Do you need this to be individually settable per room?"

Mr. Smolt considered this a moment.

"Could we have one for the guest rooms, and one for the utility cupboards? Boiling water could be useful for cleaning purposes, the nature of which my good taste will not allow me to go into."

"Certainly," said Griggin.

"Well then," said Mr. Firebrew. "When can ye start?"

Lenna closed her eyes, and floated in the lovely warm water.

"They're wrecking the place, I know they are."

"They're under strict orders not to," said Griggin.

"Relax. Mr. Firebrew gave us this room for the whole night. You won't get your money's worth out of it if you don't relax."

More water splashed into the tub. Griggin was playing with the tap.

"Try to burn yourself on this. It's coming straight from the customer-facing water tank, which is kept at just the

right temperature to avoid the growth of bacteria, then is sent to the rooms through a series of heat exchangers, so it never gets warmer than-"

Griggin came up spluttering.

"There is a beautiful, naked woman in the bath with you, and all you can look at is the taps? Mr. Griggin Steambender, it amazes me that you ever managed to find a girlfriend at all."

Griggin floated over, trying to corner Lenna in a round bath. He caught her, more easily than he should have been able to.

"That amazes me as well," he said.

File GSB-055: Prosperity

Trixie crouched down, two-handed sword raised above her head. She yelled and charged forward. The combined sweeps and thrusts were coming easier and easier to her as she practiced. No training dummy would dare stand in her way.

"You're still using too much muscle," said Bilban Tosslespanner. "Let the sword work for you. Brute force and ignorance is for Dwarves. We walk the path of effortless effort."

Kelstrum Stonebreaker, the other warrior trainer on duty, heard that. He looked round, something between a grin and a scowl on his bearded face.

"That's because ye couldn't lift yer own mammie, ye wee half-pint!"

"Ah," said Tosslespanner. "The famous Dwarvish 'Send me mother at ye' strategy."

Kelstrum Stonebreaker laughed. "Ye haven't met me mother, have ye? She could tell the Lich King to go clean his room."

Trixie rested the tip of her sword on the floor, and leant on it. The Warrior Trainers were at it again. The first time she'd seen it she was sure that it would all end in bloodshed. And it had, for values of "blood" that included wood splinters and straw. Trixie could usually make a nice training dummy last all day. When the trainers pushed each other to let rip, it didn't last two minutes.

"This is how ye do it, ye bunch o'jobbies!"

Mr. Stonebreaker launched himself at one of the dummies, battle-axe out, and made it fly up in splinters.

"Oh, very impressive, in a brutish way," said Tosslespanner. "And in only two-point-five seconds, too. Now observe, Miss Steambender. This is how Gnomes do it."

Trixie held her breath. She loved to see this, and would happily practice the rest of her life if only she could do it herself just once. Mr. Tosslespanner dropped his shield, and became a blur of metal whirling round the training dummy. He stood still, smiling, next to the dummy. At a small poke of his finger, it fell down in gentle cascades of straw.

"Bloody showoff," said Mr. Stonebreaker.

Trixie trotted home, sword strapped to her back, bouncing up and down while she ran. It was only a short way from the military ward to their house overlooking the Commons. Someone ran up next to her. He was about half a head taller than she was, and carried a shield on his back, a sword at his side. Trixie looked ahead of her, wondering.

"Salutations," said the boy.

"Hi," said Trixie. She sped up a little, and the boy kept pace with her.

"I'm Barry," said the boy. "What's your name?"

Trixie glanced aside at the lad. He wore an earring. Black hair. Ponytail. Clean shaven. She looked ahead, and said nothing.

"Nice sword you have," said Barry. "What are you, Arms?"

"Protection," said Trixie.

"Cor! So am I. Going to be a tank then?"

"Meh," said Trixie.

"I think you're way too pretty to be a tank," said Barry. "Also, you may want to drop that two-hander and get a shield. Just saying."

Trixie gave Barry another look. Smarmy git. They trotted side by side over the bridge.

"I want to go fury," said Trixie.

"Way to go! That's much more like you. I can see it in your eyes."

"Dad won't let me. Says it'll make me too aggressive."

Barry grinned. "I *like* feisty women."

Trixie scowled. "Sod off."

"Hah. Precisely."

Trixie sped up a bit more. Barry kept pace. Well, at least he was fit. They came up to Steambender Manor. Trixie fumbled for her keys.

"Well," said Trixie, "This is where I live. See ya."

"Hey," said Barry. "You still haven't told me what your name is."

Trixie looked over her shoulder.

"No. No, I haven't. Bye."

She closed the door. Barry stared at it for a while, chuckled to himself, then ran off.

"Boo," said Nix, appearing behind Trixie. "Who's that then?"

Trixie gave Nix a weary look. There ought to be a rule against stealth in the house.

"Nobody," she said. "Followed me home, and I didn't want to keep him."

"Oo! Does Little Sister have an admirer?"

"And why not? He said I was too pretty to be a tank."

Nix laughed. "Have you seen some of the tanks? Must try harder. Now too pretty to be a *priestess*, that's trying."

"Well, I'll leave that to you," said Trixie. "All you need is a bit of *rouge*."

Nix winced. That particular word always gave him the shudders, even when used correctly. It reminded him that most of the Gnomish, Dwarvish, Human or Elf race were idiots, and in the annoying way, not in the easily exploitable way.

"Who is he, anyway?"

"He's called Barry. Probably trains in the same place I do. Never noticed him before."

Nix grinned wickedly. "So. Are you going to be Trix 'n Barry or Baz and Trixie? Important to work out in advance. Last one wears the trousers."

Trixie batted her eyelashes at Nix. "I may not even let it come to that. Maybe I'll just use him for sex. By the way, you *did* put in those reinforcing struts on the upper bed, did you? Cause he looks like the energetic type."

Nix stared. Images appeared in his head that he really could have done without.

"Um no, I didn't."

"Oh. Oh well. We'll just use the lower one, then."

"Oh no you don't! That's where I sleep!" Nix scowled. "You're disgusting."

A filthy grin was on Trixie's face. With a flick of her hand, she swept a pink ponytail back over her shoulder.

"Some boys *like* that!"

Griggin turned off the boiler. It had passed the checks, and soon another Dwarf in Ironforge would have hot and cold running water. This was one of the places without access to a convenient spring or stream or water well, so he'd have to put in a tank as well. Nix was out to check with Mr. Deepforge the blacksmith that it was ready. These small models, the OP-125s,

were by far his best seller. The big OP-5000 for the Stonefire Tavern had been a one-off, and at any rate was scandalously over-powered for the job. But Customer was Happy, and that was the main thing. Griggin visited the tavern every few weeks or so, usually just to see if everything was still working as specified, sometimes to put in another shower or taps. So far, he'd had to replace one tap that some ingenious customer had managed to break trying to clean his war hammer in the sink.

He took his keys out of his pocket, and opened one of the wide drawers that held his designs. He'd heard of a custom, popular in the North, of stoking a fire in a small cavern or even in a specially constructed tent, to heat up stones. Water would then be poured over the stones to make steam, which promoted sweating. This, apparently, cleared out the accumulated filth from one's pores, leaving the skin in pristine condition. The Northmen would then run out and roll around in the snow, to cool off. The practice was known as "Loyly" and was a much-valued custom among the people of the North. But pouring water on hot rocks? We can do better than that. The OP-125 could provide both hot steam and icy cold water. Another issue was that

people sweating in this small room for extended periods of time was a wonderful way to promote the growth of all manner of fungi and bacteria. Fortunately, super-heated high pressure steam was just the thing for that. So the steam bath would be self-cleaning.

Griggin shook his head. This was clearly an idea that needed to mature for a bit. A while ago, he'd sold someone a bath that would pump air into the bath from below, making the water bubble as if the user were in one of the famous Troll's cooking pots in Stranglethorn Vale. Without, of course, the being boiled alive, then eaten. He had tested the concept on Lenna, and she had approved. after a thorough evaluation. Putting soap in the water had nearly flooded the workshop with bubbles, so there had been a small addendum to the user's manual.

All in all, they weren't doing too badly. Nix and Trixie were making good progress at their respective schools, Bieslook was eating them out of house and home, and Lenna could afford the occasional luxury. Most of Griggin's money, he put back into the Steam Fund, though. He still dreamed of tapping the sheer endless power of the Great Forge itself. Actually submerging metal pipes in the fiery lake was out of the question. It

was, after all, not enough to melt rock. So he'd have to position his heat exchanger at such a height above the surface that convection and radiation could heat up the water passed through it. Turbines could power the pumps, so the entire installation would be completely self-sufficient. Griggin was thinking of locating it under the bridge, out of sight, out of mind. But, Griggin thought, it would be a fortune in Titansteel. Even all of his savings would only allow him to build one small prototype with which to convince King Magni. Griggin sighed. So far to go yet, with no sure knowledge that he'd be able to pull it off. He put the designs back in the drawers, licked a finger and touched one of the pipes on the boiler. It had cooled down enough to move. Time to make another customer happy.

Griggin walked along the passageway from the Mystic Ward to the Great Forge, taking his time. As always when passing the Great Forge, he stopped on the bridge, back to the Great Anvil, and looked into the burning molten rock below, dreaming, dreaming. Sometimes it seemed to him that dream about it would be all he could do. Today, another Gnome walked up next to him and, like Griggin did, looked into the

inferno. The Gnome looked aside at Griggin.

"You're thinking steam, aren't you?"

Griggin looked round at the Gnomish man next to him.

"Steam, hot water. Turbines. Electricity, even. We could do so much, but this lake is so hot that even Titansteel couldn't survive for long."

The other Gnome nodded. "I've been thinking of using the same magic armoursmiths use to make armour fire resistant, for my heat exchanger. But enchantments don't last. You don't want some damn clothie to have to come in and do the enchants every week."

"That would be inconvenient and dull. Dull work is what machines are there for."

"Exactly."

The Gnome turned to Griggin, held out his hand.

"Anton Glowpipe, at your service."

"Griggin Steambender, at yours," said Griggin, taking it.

"Steambender? Are you the Gnome with the water heaters? I've spotted those. Ingenious. My honour prevents me from disassembling one, but I must say

I'm at a loss as to how you're powering them."

"My associate found a way of extracting the energy from crystals found in a place called Un'goro Crater. I made the concept marketable by adding safety features and reducing noise."

"Who is your associate? I'd like to meet him."

"Marvin Sprocket, but we went our separate ways a while ago." Griggin stared back into the churning lake of lava. "I'm afraid I am mostly to blame."

"*Marvin Sprocket?* Ye gods, if it's the Gnome I'm thinking of, then I blame him, no matter what. I was his Sane, a year or two ago. Took me months in the House for the Bewildered to get over it. Imagine that. He's not *here*, is he?"

Griggin sighed. "No, I don't think so. He is a kind soul, and I'm afraid I must have scared him with the less pleasant aspects of my... magical vocation. I hope he's well, wherever he is."

"You spooked *him*? Well done sir."

Griggin said nothing.

"Say, do you fancy a pint of something or other? It's always good to meet a fellow Steampunk. I could introduce you to my wife."

Griggin pulled out a watch, and looked at it.

"Actually, I should be home in ten minutes or so. But how about meeting up after dinner? I can bring my son. He's working on his Journeyman's piece. I have educated Mr. Firebrew at the Stonefire Tavern on the proper strength of coffee."

"Really? Then I must sample his work. About eight?"

"Fine. See you there."

"Would you like me to carry that for you?"

Trixie looked over her shoulder, not entirely surprised to see Barry standing next to her with a winning grin on his face. She noticed he was wearing a leather jerkin and a small skull on a leather string round his neck. He looked more like a pirate than a warrior. She swapped the bag of groceries from one hand to the other and started walking.

"No."

"Aww, come on. I'm just trying to be nice. I'll even give it back to you when you get home, *without* you having to ask for it. Now where will you get a better offer than that?"

"Anywhere I want," said Trixie.

Barry laughed. "I believe you, really I do. Mind if I walk with you?"

" 's a free city," said Trixie.

"And I'm very glad it is."

Trixie glanced at Barry, and started towards home, grocery bag hefted on her back.

"So what'd you buy?"

Trixie sighed. "Veg. Milk. Potatoes. Boar ribs. What's it to you?"

"Well, I want to know what you eat to get a figure like that. I could get any girl I wanted if I looked as good."

"So now you know. Bog off."

Barry walked on, shaking his head.

"Why are you being such a pain? I'm really only trying to be nice. Don't tell me that nobody else tries it on with you."

Trixie scowled. "Nobody so far. And before you ask, that suits me fine. Last thing I need is some boy hanging on all the time."

"Oh come on. Do I look like I'd do that? I'm an independent type, me. I just happen to like warrior girls. You're a warrior girl. We could... worry together."

Trixie gave him a scornful look.

"That's a very bad joke."

"Humble apologies, O shining one."

"Pf."

"You still haven't told me your name."

Trixie sighed, and did.

"Trixie. Short for Patricia?"

"No."

"Nice name."

Trixie gave him a look that conveyed precisely how much she cared whether he liked her name or not, swapped her bag of groceries to her other hand and walked on.

"Hey. Me and a few mates are going for a few drinks in the Stone Table after class. Want to come?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Oh come on. What do you have to do that's so important?"

"I'm starting an interesting rock collection."

"Oh? How many do you have?"

"None. So better get moving."

Trixie opened the door, and stepped inside.

"Hey," said Barry. "Stone Table, seven o'clock. Maybe some of the guys'll even have a rock or a

pebble for you."

"Goodbye, Barry."

The door closed.

"Until we meet again, Trixie," said Barry.

"I still think that immersing heat exchangers in molten lava is a non-starter. Even Titansteel. Thing'll melt in a week."

"Even if you put fire resistant charms on it? Channel most of the heat away? That's how they keep the place from going up in smoke here."

"That's a one-off. The Dwarf enchanters here have a cushy job renewing the enchantments every fortnight or so, but I don't want to spend eternity here. Greener pastures and so on."

"Gnomeregan? Bloody glowing green pastures there. Just what Mekkatorque was thinking, I'll never understand."

"Oh shut up about Gnomeregan, Chint. It's not funny and it's not useful."

"Yeah, you're right. Anyway, couldn't we try to channel the excess heat back into the lake?"

"No," said Anton Glowpipe. "Heat cannot of itself pass from one body to a hotter body."

"Not of itself," said his wife Beatrice. "But you could set it up like a firebolt. Shoot the excess heat right back into the lake. Cool pipes, everybody happy."

"Well, you can try if you like but you'd far better not," said Chint.

Griggin raised a finger. "But, Lady and gentlemen, conduction is not the only way in which heat can move. There's also convection and radiation. Why don't we simply move the heat exchanger far enough above the surface to avoid it melting, but close enough to grab the heat?"

"Dwarves won't stand for it," said Beatrice. "The heat redirection spells funnel off all the heat about a half-inch above the surface. You could levitate above it without breaking a sweat."

"But surely, they could remove a small portion for the heat exchanger?"

Anton laughed. "I want to be there when you put it to them, just to see the look on their faces."

Beatrice turned to Griggin. "It took the Dwarves ten years to set up this heat shield. Nobody wants to poke a hole in it."

"Hmm..." Griggin rubbed his chin. He was enjoying himself. It had been a while since he could bounce ideas off fellow engineers, and he'd missed it. He picked up his coffee cup and drained it before it could get cold. He held up the empty cup.

"More coffee anyone?"

Nix sat up, eyes shining.

"Could I have another beer, please?"

Griggin gave him a fatherly look.

"How many so far?"

"Just two! I can take another one!"

"I'm *not* carrying you home, nor am I going to clean up after you. And neither is your mother. Understood?"

"Sure, Dad."

Griggin wandered off to the bar, to return with coffee for Anton Glowpipe, Chint Waterspray and himself, red wine for Beatrice, and a pint of Thunderbrew for Nix.

"We should do this more often," said Griggin. "Each one of us has been knocking his or her head against this problem. Maybe together we can crack it."

"Hah," said Chint, with a grin. "We're a conspiracy, to make Ironforge a hotter and wetter place."

Beatrice gave Chint a look. "And what, pray, do you mean by that?"

"Warm water for everyone," said Chint. "What else?"

Meanwhile, Anton was scribbling on his pad. Griggin looked at the paper.

"What's that?"

"Something just popped into my head," said Anton. "I've almost got it right, but I need a synonym for 'Club' or 'Gathering' or 'Organisation' that starts with an N."

Griggin read.

"Ironforge Gnomish *Blank* for the Investigation of Thermal Energy. I.G.N.I.T.E. Looks good, except for the N. Suggestions?"

"Neighbors?" said Beatrice.

"Meh," said Anton.

"OrgaMisation?" said Chint.

"It's supposed to be an acronym," said Anton. "That nym isn't very acro."

"Nationals?"

"Ne'er-do-wells?"

"Noses?"

"Nasties?"

"Neverending Investigations?"

Nix looked mournfully at the bottom of his beer mug. Not a drop left. He had taken rather a liking to Thunderbrew's ales. It was one of the few nice things about this place. He started paying attention to what the Big Ones were saying.

"Whut?"

Beatrice smiled at Nix. "Synonym for 'Organisation' or 'Club' starting with N."

"Network," said Nix.

Everybody stared at him.

"*What?*"

"Network it is," said Anton. "So we are now the Ironforge Gnomish Network for the Investigation of Thermal Energy. IGNITE for short."

"Yay!" said Nix, holding up his empty pint.

There was a small noise in the middle of the night, and Nix woke up. Rogues never sleep easy. He saw Trixie climb up the ladder to her bed, and get in.

"You're in trouble," said Nix.

Trixie looked down over the edge of her bed.

"Why? It's still before midnight."

"No it's not," said Nix.

"Well, it was when I closed the door behind me."

"Where've you been?"

"For a few drinks with some class-mates. Why?"

"Barry isn't in your class."

Trixie glared.

"How did you know-"

"I didn't. Now I do."

"Well, keep your trap shut about it."

Nix sneered.

"I don't like him. He looks dodgy to me."

"Takes one to know one."

"Yeah, whatever. Been buying you drinks, has he?"

"Sure. What else are boys for?"

Nix looked up at his sister's face. "Do I need to draw you a picture?"

"As long as you draw me on top."

"By the Titans, Trix..."

"And what makes you think it's any of your business?"

Nix said nothing for a while. Then he shook his head.

"Head over hormones, Sis. Oh, and *not* in *my* bed.

Reinforce yours yourself if you must."

"Sod you."

"Not my taste," said Nix. He turned over, and went back to sleep.

File GSB-056: Conquest

Griggin was walking back to his workshop, toolbox in hand. It had been a busy afternoon. He'd warned the Customer that the stream was too far away for the smallest pump to get the water out. The Customer had said that he quite understood, and that he would accept the lower rate of flow. Griggin had sighed, put in the pump as asked, and sure enough, only a trickle of hot water came out. The Customer, of course, was Not Pleased with this and had demanded Griggin upgrade the pump for nothing. Griggin had no problem with upgrading the pump, it was the 'for nothing' that bothered him. In the end, to make the deal, he'd slapped on a good discount and left the Dwarf to consider his options. He had the next model up in his workshop, so at least he could swap it in quickly.

Oh well. Another IGNITE meeting this evening. He was looking forward to it. They'd have a special guest, a Dwarf who had drilling equipment to drill shafts into the rock above the magma stream that fed the lake of lava. The distinction was important, lava being magma that came up to the surface. They didn't actually want

to drill *into* the magma stream, because after some discussion the consensus was that King Magni would probably object to having a miniature volcano in his city. All they needed to do was to drill down close enough to the magma to boil water. Mr. Stonehand maintained that he was the only Dwarf in Ironforge who could. So they'd invited him to explain. After all this time, the ideas were actually going ahead. So far, of course, ideas were all they were, but with Mr. Stonehand's equipment, they just might be able to drill down and install their first proof-of-concept machine right in Tinker Town.

As Griggin approached the workshop, he noticed a small, black envelope tacked onto his door with a pin. A dark suspicion came over him as he reached for it. He knew of only one group of people who would go for such cloak-and-dagger gestures. With a sigh, he opened the envelope, and took out a small note. There was the smell of ozone in the air as he read it.

Fellow Warlock,

The Gnomeregan Warlock Society (in exile),
requests your presence at the Forlorn Pool at the

stroke of midnight, this evening, to discuss matters of great importance.

Acting Chief Warlock Briarthorn

Just as Griggin read the signature, there was a fizzing noise, and the piece of paper caught fire. He dropped it quickly, and stuck his finger in his mouth, an annoyed frown on his face. That was going to cut his meeting short. But it couldn't be helped. Joining the Society wasn't really optional for any Warlock who wanted to use the facilities such as the grimoires, summoning circles or for that matter, the fresh air. Independent Warlocks were generally frowned upon. Post-humously, in most cases. Griggin could see the reasoning behind this, but he hadn't missed the self-important gits in the slightest while he was here. Oh well, nothing for it. He dropped his toolbox inside the door, locked it and went home.

Trixie raised her hand, along with several others. Bilban Tosslespanner pointed at her.

"Miss Steambender? Step forward, please. Mr. Blackknife, your assignment is to win past Miss Steambender, and chop the melon on the pole in two before time runs out. Miss Steambender will, of course, try to prevent you from doing so."

They squared off. Barry grinned at Trixie.

"Go easy on me? I'll be in your class if I win."

"If you fail, I get to beat you up the next time."

"If I don't, you get to spar with me each lesson."

"Fat lot of good *that'll* do me."

Barry ducked behind his shield and lunged at Trixie, sword out. Trixie parried the sword easily with her two-hander and pushed Barry away. For good measure, she slashed out with her sword. It connected with Barry's shield with a loud clang. Barry looked at her, eyes large.

"Watch it, will you?"

Trixie stabbed straight out.

"*You* watch it."

Barry backed up a bit, to get a run-up for a charge. Trixie, a grin on her face, followed him, sweeping her sword high, at Barry's head, then low at his legs.

"You're going the wrong way," said Trixie.

"Yeah," said Barry. He raised his shield, waited till Trixie swept her sword low, parried with his sword and shoved his shield into her. Trixie leapt back, to avoid falling over, and Barry shoved her again. This time Trixie was prepared, and braced herself, raising her sword, tip down, between them.

"Give it up," said Barry. "I don't want to hurt you."

Trixie's eyes shone at him, full of the light of battle.

"Wimp."

"Right. Now I *do* want to hurt you."

He slashed out quickly with his sword, and Trixie had to move quickly to parry all the strokes. Barry pushed away her sword with his shield, and scored a hit to Trixie's midsection. Trixie's two-hander came round with vicious speed and might have severed Barry's arm if he hadn't got his shield up in time.

"You hit like a girl," said Trixie.

"So do you."

"I *am* a girl. What's your excuse?"

Barry grinned. "Your beauty distracts me."

"Git."

"Half time," said Trainer Tosslespanner. "Is this a fight, or a cosy get-together?"

Barry looked at the hourglass, and crouched down. He pushed forward, shoving Trixie back with his shield, keeping her busy with sword-strokes. Trixie spotted a weak spot in his stance, whirled round and brought her sword down on Barry's shoulder-piece. Barry cried out, and his arm hung limp, stunned. Trixie gave him a good shove, and he staggered back a few steps.

"Nice armour," said Trixie.

Barry growled, dropped his shield, and swapped his sword to his other hand. He struck out, fast. Trixie parried all his strokes with her sword.

"Ten seconds," said Tosslespanner. "Get on with it, Mr. Blackknife."

Trixie raised her sword, taking a step and a half back. Her eyes found Barry's. Another second ticked away. Trixie raised her eyebrow a fraction. Barry grinned, and leapt at Trixie, sweeping out with his sword, then pushing his shoulder into her. Trixie stumbled and fell on to her back. Three... Two... Barry leapt ahead, and his sword slashed round. The melon burst into pieces.

Barry blinked. He'd *done* it! His arm reminded him of previous events. He stuck his sword into the sand, and rubbed his shoulder. Then, he walked over to Trixie,

and reached out to her with his left hand. She grabbed it with her right, and he pulled her to her feet. He looked into her eyes.

"Good fight," said Barry, "Thank you."

"Heels over the ditch, Mr. Blackknife," said Tosslespanner. "But nevertheless, a pass. Well done."

Griggin looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes to midnight, and the IGNITE meeting didn't show any signs of stopping, or even slowing down. Sad to say, the agenda had largely been abandoned and the variously sized engineers were swapping war stories about god-like engineership. Very enjoyable, but it didn't help much. Griggin got up.

"Lady and Gentlemen, I'm afraid I have another appointment. Good night to you all, and many thanks for your interesting explanation, Mr. Stonehand."

"And to you, Mr. Steambender. I'll get back to ye on the issue of the drill heads."

Griggin left the tavern, and walked past the Great Anvil towards the Forlorn Cavern. Despite its name, the Forlorn Cavern was one of the more pleasant places in Ironforge. There was a small pool of water, and the

noise of Tinker Town and the other busy places of Ironforge was a distant murmur. A place to sit and think, or meditate. Or, in this case, meet your fellow Warlocks. Griggin pulled his hood over his face and hid his hands in the sleeves of his robes. He sat down on a boulder and pretended to be asleep.

"I hear the weather in Eredun is quite inclement these days."

Griggin looked up. A Gnome, wearing a robe much like Griggin's own, stood in front of him, eyes shining under his hood.

"To the Sayaad, there is no ill weather, merely vestments of ill quality."

The other knome bowed his head. "Greetings, Warlock Griggin Steambender, and welcome to the Gnomeregan Warlock's Society in exile. Please follow me to a place away from listening ears, and prying eyes, that we may discuss matters of a confidential nature without fear of discovery."

Griggin stood up, sighing. A simple "let's get out of sight" would have worked here. One of the side-effects of belonging to a secret society seemed to be that you were forced to use as many words as you could to say the simplest of things, till words came out in a long thin

string of verbal diarrhoea. He followed his fellow Warlock into a small room. There were about ten Gnome men and women gathered round a table that took up most of the room. They were all cloaked and hooded as Griggin was. The room was dimly lit with only a few candles. Griggin took a deep breath, counting. There had been about a hundred Warlocks in the Society in Gnomeregan. Was this sorry group all that was left of them? The Gnome at the head of the table was looking at his hands lying on the table. He raised his head.

"Welcome, fellow Warlocks, and may your minds be steadfast. I see that the search for our learned colleagues has resulted in the discovery of another one. Greetings, Warlock Steambender."

"Greetings," said Griggin.

"As you can see, Warlock Steambender, our numbers have dwindled. Many of our vocation have been slain in the Gnomeregan massacre, but so far, our studies show that more of us were scattered than were slain, and to return our wandering brethren to the fold is still our most urgent concern. I am pleased that you have been found."

Griggin bowed his head, hoping that this gesture might be interpreted to mean that he, too, was pleased to be back. In truth, he had never liked the Society much, as a body, though he did have a few good friends. Mostly, his friends had shared his opinions. There was one thing he did want to know, though.

"Has Warlock Chief Sindala been counted among the survivors?"

The Acting Chief looked at Griggin.

"We have not detected his Daemons in the Wild Nethers. We must therefore assume that Warlock Chief Sindala is alive." He paused a moment. "Whether he is enjoying life where he is, is an entirely separate issue. We have no knowledge of his whereabouts. The grimoires have not been recovered."

Griggin gave a single nod. It would of course be inappropriate to apply the words "Done A Runner" to the chief of his order. However accurate it might turn out to be. Oh well.

"And so," said Acting Chief Warlock Briarthorn, "We are glad to have a high-ranking Warlock such as yourself back in the ranks. As is right and proper, we will elect a new acting leader at the next meeting. Your candidacy is assumed."

Griggin was glad that his hood covered his face. Oh *burst!* The last thing he wanted was to preside over meeting after meeting of these pompous gits.

"Acting Chief, I am afraid that is impossible. If I am correct in my assumptions, I was one of the very last to see Chief Warlock Sindala alive. This means that I am now beholden to carry out his final orders. For obvious reasons, I cannot go into the exact nature of such orders, but this much I can say. They preclude my assuming any kind of leadership role within the Circle."

Acting Chief Briarthorn managed to look crestfallen even in a robe that covered his head and body.

"Then that must be the way of it. We will continue the search for Chief Sindala."

Griggin stepped out of the door, when there was a tap on his shoulder. He looked behind him into the face of one of his vague friends from Gnomeregan.

"Warlock Griggin. Good to see you alive and well."

"Edward. Still upright, I see."

"Yes. Congratulations on not becoming Acting Chief. Well deflected. Briarthorn has been trying to foist off the mantle on everybody since we got here."

"No sign of our Fearless Leader, then?"

"I think he's grabbed the grimoires, as much of the gold as would fit in his pockets, and bugged off somewhere safe," said Edward happily. "At least we can work with Briarthorn. He's not as difficult as Sindala."

Griggin sighed inward. He knew that Chief Warlock Sindala could be inflexible now and then, but to be honest, when he was, there usually was a good reason. It was slightly worrisome that standards were being relaxed. Griggin staunchly refused the thought that he should do something about this, to enter his mind.

"Well, I'm off," said Griggin. "See you at the next meeting."

The Stonefire Tavern was on the way to Griggin's home, and he couldn't help glancing in the window to see if the meeting was still going on. As it happened, it was, if one could 'meet' alone. Beatrice Glowpipe was sitting on her own in a corner, staring into a half-empty glass of red wine. Griggin walked up to her.

"Hello. Working out the minutes?"

Beatrice looked up at him. Griggin could see in her eyes that this glass was definitely not the first of the

evening. Her eyes wrinkled.

"I'm thinking of calling them 'Engineering for really tough guys'."

"Where's that husband of yours?"

Something in Beatrice's face hardened.

"Left early," she said. "Just after you did. I wonder if he's home already."

Griggin looked at the clock. It was two in the morning. The Stonefire Tavern never closed, but the bar had stopped serving drinks.

"Why don't I walk you home?"

Beatrice drained her glass, then got up.

"Why don't you?"

As it happened, it was only a little way off. There were no lights on. Anton must already be in bed, or not back yet. Beatrice fumbled with her handbag, and produced her keys. She unlocked her door, and turned to Griggin.

"Thanks. Can I offer you something? Coffee perhaps?"

Griggin smiled, and shook his head. "No thank you. If I drink any coffee at this time of night, I won't sleep. Good night, Beatrice."

Beatrice gave Griggin a smile, then went inside.

"Trix! Wait up!"

Trixie turned round, to see Barry hurrying towards her.

"Hiya gorgeous," said Barry.

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "Now if you'd say that like you mean it, I'd be impressed. What's up?"

"We-ell, my mates and me, we're going to have a little picnic tonight. To celebrate my passing the exam. Wanna come?"

"Picnic? Where?"

Barry grinned. "Gol'bolar Quarry. It's a picnic with... entertainment. We're going to raid the mine and kick some serious Trogg."

Trixie opened her eyes wide. "Is that allowed?"

"My dear, it's practically encouraged! The Dorfs are having almost as much trouble with Troggs as we have, and we're offering our vast experience in dealing with the buggers. Humongous piss-up afterwards."

"Yeah... We did kill lots of them, but we also killed a lot of our own people. Not a shining example, that. Are we going to do that as well?"

"Oh don't be a sissy. Nobody's going to die. Nobody important anyway."

"Oh good. Am I important?"

Barry grabbed Trixie's hand, and pressed it to his chest.

"You are the most important thing in the world to me."

"At the risk of repeating myself, try saying that like you mean it."

"C'mon Trix. It'll be fun! And we'd be helping the miners there win their quarry back."

"Oh alright. I'll ask my mum. If she says it's alright, I'll be there."

"Great! Oh, do you have a Strider? Bit of a long run otherwise."

"I'll ask Dad if I can borrow the old one."

"It's an out-of-school thing," said Trixie. "Practical experience in offensive and defensive capabilities."

Lenna looked into Trixie's big blue eyes. Trixie knew better than to look away. After a few moments, Lenna snorted.

"Is any alcohol involved?"

"Um, yes. But you know I don't like to drink much anyway. Can I go? All my class is going."

Lenna looked doubtful. In her time, she'd been to a few of these "extracurricular activities", but that was in what she called the Days Before She Came To Her Senses. She stared into the middle distance. Strangely, coming to her senses had coincided with her meeting this dashing young warlock. Her last act of unthinking recklessness had been to marry him. She reached out over the table, and put her hand on Trixie's arm.

"You know to take care of yourself, don't you?"

Trixie's eyes gleamed. "Oh yes, Mum."

"If I find you've run away with a circus, sold yourself into slavery, become a Dark Queen or otherwise behaved in manners unbecoming a Gnomish Warrior princess, it'll be fireballs at dawn, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mum," said Trixie, her face glowing.

"Go on then. Enjoy yourself."

"Oh," said Trixie. "Can I borrow the old strider?"

"Ask your dad."

"Ye gods. Couldn't you have found a more quiet strider? This one'll scare off all the Troggs."

"Well, isn't getting them out of the mine the whole point?"

Barry grinned at Trixie. "Not really, no."

Trixie looked ahead. "You sure this kind of thing is allowed?"

"Sure! Done it loads of times. As long as you talk to the Dwarfs at the entrance first, so they know you're there and not to shoot you if you come back out, you're fine. If they're in a good mood, they'll even pay you."

Trixie looked round. There were about a dozen of them, boys and girls. All grinning, looking forward eagerly, their best weapons at their sides. Most were on mechanostriders, though some had managed to get their hands on one of the rams that Dwarves used for their mounts. Nobody looked like they expected to die tonight. Trixie said nothing and rode on.

Trixie stood still, shaking, in the gloom of Gol'bolar Quarry. Her two-handed sword was in her hands, dripping with blood. All round her, people were cheering. She looked again at the dead Trogg at her feet. He'd come at her, howling with anger, armed with

a club fashioned out of the thighbone of something altogether larger than a Gnome, or even a Dwarf. At that point, her training had taken over and she'd struck out, fast. It had been ridiculously easy. Though they were angry, savage, the Troggs weren't really good fighters. Trixie had killed maybe half a dozen. She hadn't thought to start counting. She raised her sword up to her eyes, gleaming in the moonlight, except where it wasn't gleaming. A sudden urge came on her to wipe it clean. She took out the oily rag she kept in her pocket for the purpose, and carefully removed the dark liquid. When not a trace was left, she sheathed the sword.

People were piling all the bodies in a great heap. Someone walked up with a can of Mechanostrider fuel, poured it over the mound of corpses and dropped a lit match on it. Trixie scowled. Stupid people. Did they think Troggs were made of wood? You needed at least thirty cans for a mound this big. All they'd do was scorch them slightly, with more light than actual heat. She looked at the mound, and took a quick breath. She watched more carefully. There it was! One of the shapes was moving feebly. Anger flared up, and with one fluid movement, Trixie drew her sword and plunged

it deep into the Trogg's chest. She felt the hilt of her sword tug in her hand as the body spasmed, then lay still among the crackling flames. She glared at the Gnome with the fuel can.

"You idiot! Can't you make sure the sods are dead before setting them on fire?"

"Heh. Who cares?"

Trixie looked at him, drunk with the joy of killing, satisfied with a job well done. Not worth arguing with. She turned round, to look into the face of Barry Blackknife. She opened her mouth to say something, but Barry grabbed her shoulders, pulled her close and kissed her, to jeers and shouts of his mates.

"*This* is what victory tastes like!" Barry's eyes gleamed at Trixie. "Do you like it?"

Trixie grimaced, trying to get rid of the smell of burning fuel and burning flesh.

"You were talking about a giant piss-up. Got any booze?"

"More than we can drink," said Barry. "Probably."

Lenna turned over in bed. Griggin made some indistinct noises, and turned his head round to her.

"What izzit?"

"Nothing," said Lenna.

"Oh good," said Griggin. He turned onto his back and waited.

"She's not back yet."

"She'll be fine. She's thirty-two. She'll come of age next year."

Lenna sighed.

"When did that happen? I remember carrying her up the stairs on my arm about two weeks ago."

Griggin laughed quietly.

"Time dilation effects. Eddies in the space-time continuum."

"Must be it. And now she's out at some wild party. I don't buy that 'School Project' stuff for a minute."

"So why didn't you say no, then?"

Lenna rolled onto her back, hands behind her head. She stared at the ceiling, quietly.

"My mum said no. Didn't help a bit. At least this way, she knows she can come back."

"She would anyway. And I like to think that our Warrior Princess is smart enough to stay out of trouble."

Lenna took a deep breath

"I was. And still."

Griggin got behind Lenna and put his arms round her, gently stroking her stomach. Memories bubbled to the surface.

"You didn't use to wear a nightie in bed, in those days."

"And look where it got me."

Griggin pulled Lenna a bit closer.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," he said.

Trixie shut off the engine on her Strider, and pressed the button to collapse it. The old bird folded itself down. Next to her, Barry did the same. He dropped the Strider in the locker and shut the door.

"Hey Trix? Wanna come up to my room? I've got a bottle of cider upstairs that was too good to waste on the bumpkins at the picnic."

Trixie looked at Barry. What, no coffee?

"Sure."

They walked up the stairs. Trixie had half expected to find Barry's room in decomposing squalor, but to her surprise it was neat and tidy. There was a big sofa, a

coffee table, a dinner table pushed against the wall, a wardrobe.

"Sit down. Just let me get this."

Barry ducked into the cold-box and emerged with a green bottle. He grabbed two glasses, which he gave to Trixie. He pulled the metal wire off the cork, and opened the bottle with a modest 'Pop'. Cider poured into the glasses, fizzing, foaming, then settling down. Barry sat down, next to Trixie. He laid his arm on the back of the sofa, definitely not round Trixie's shoulders. Not that she was fooled for a minute, but, as she sipped the fizzy drink, she found she didn't mind all that much.

"So," said Barry. "What do you think? Good way to spend an evening?"

Trixie wagged a hand non-committally.

"Doesn't it make you feel alive?"

Trixie sighed. "It wasn't *that* dangerous, was it? For us."

"For us, sure," said Barry. "You and me, we could probably have cleared out those Troggs without the rest there. The others, though. For them, it's a bit more tricky."

Barry stopped pretending and put his arm round Trixie's shoulders.

"I have to admit though," he said, and grinned at Trixie. "A fight like that does give me an appetite."

Trixie looked at Barry. "Well, I think the Stone Table is probably closed by now, but I think I could--"

Barry gently touched Trixie's cheek, turning her face up to him. He looked into her eyes.

"That's not the kind of appetite I'm talking about."

Trixie fell silent. She took a slow, deep breath, looking at Barry, wishing she hadn't had quite as much to drink as she had.

"Um," said Trixie.

Barry's hand was at the back of her head, playing with one of her ponytails. He stroked her hair. Then, he pulled her a bit closer, closed his eyes, and kissed her. Back at the quarry, Trixie had been surprised, and somewhere between annoyed at her fellow warriors and amused at Barry's reaction. This, though, was quite a different kind of kiss. Slower, hungry, promising. It went on for quite a while, until Trixie found herself looking into Barry's eyes. She was breathing faster. Her hands somehow had found their way to Barry's waist. Barry wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Again?"

Trixie closed her eyes. Well, just another kiss couldn't do any harm. As long as it didn't go any further than that. Yeah right, said the last remains of her brain. Like you're just going to leave it at kissing. It did feel good, though. Very good.

Barry grinned at her from two inches away.

"I think we're in the wrong room, and wearing too much."

"Wait." Trixie put her hand on Barry's chest. Her fingers brushed that ridiculous skull-on-a-string he wore.

"Don't you want to? I can tell you do, unless I'm very much wrong."

"No. Yes. It's just," Trixie closed her eyes a second, looked down. "I haven't done this before."

Barry gaped at her. "You're a *virgin*? A gorgeous girl like you? At, what, thirty? That's... unnatural!" He held her face in his hands. "Don't worry. I'll be careful."

Trixie looked up. "I don't want to get--"

"Don't worry. Got the things in my room." Barry's fingers ran down the collar of Trixie's shirt. "I'll take good care of you. You're in good hands with me."

Trixie looked up at the ceiling, wide awake. So that was it, then. Girl to woman in, what? Ten minutes? People had told her that it was supposed to hurt the first time. It had, but she'd had worse in sparring matches. So that was over with. No more distractions. Just undiluted fun from now on. She looked at her, well, lover she supposed, next to her on the bed, asleep. Trixie was feeling unaccountably short-changed. If this was really what having a sex-life was all about, then she didn't understand why everybody went on about it so much. It had been novel, but not the explosion of bliss everybody seemed to have had.

She looked down. Barry's hand was still on her bare breast. She picked up his wrist gently between thumb and forefinger, and dropped it beside him on the sheets. Well, at least he had been quick about it. The conclusion came to her, fighting its way through the barriers of pretend and expectations and self-delusion. This simply hadn't been any good. It hadn't been what she had waited for all her life. Her first time with a boy had, well, sucked.

She looked at Barry asleep, lying on his stomach, face half buried in the pillow, mouth open, gently

snoring. Would this improve with age and practice? The answer came to her even before she'd finished asking it. She sighed, and carefully got up. Not a keeper, then. She almost felt she had to wake him up and tell him, but she couldn't face it. Tomorrow's another day. She quietly put her clothes back on, started up her old and decrepit Mechanostrider and rode home.

She took off her clothes, chucked them straight into the washing machine. Then, she walked to the bath and turned the tap on to hot. As the bath filled, she pulled the bands from her hair and let it fall over her shoulders. She held her hand in the bath water. It was too hot, but she lowered herself into it anyway, the water nearly burning her skin.

She closed her eyes, and simply floated for a while. She'd tell him in the morning. Thanks for a wonderful evening, but if you don't mind, I'll keep looking. She pulled the plug from the bath, and watched the water fall, down her shoulders, breasts, hips, until it was all gone. She climbed out of the bath, towelled herself off like every evening, put on her plain faded pink nightgown and climbed into bed. She'd tell him in the morning.

File GSB-057: Attraction

Lenna gently let Bieslook down onto the ground, then dismounted and collapsed the mechanostrider. She looked round the small town of Kharanos. It had been a while since she was here, running away from the Gnomeregan troubles, in a small cart containing all their possessions, not *quite* seeing eye to eye with the authorities. She put a hand on Bieslook's hair. My goodness, the girl was going to need a haircut again. What were they feeding her, fertiliser? With a private sigh, Lenna walked into the tavern. She didn't often go into such places anymore. Lenna walked up to the bar. She could smell the ale and wine. The barman put down the book he was reading and gave Lenna his friendly barman's look.

"Good morning, love. What can I do for ye?"

"Tea, please, and a glass of apple juice for the little one."

"Coming up."

Lenna accepted her mug of tea, added milk and looked round. She didn't spot any obvious mages.

"Scuse me?"

"Aye, lass?"

"Have you seen a Mage called Magis Sparkmantle here?"

The dwarf laughed. "Practic'ly lives here. If he stays any longer, I'll start charging him rent. He's usually up in the room to the right of the stairs, going out."

"Right. Thanks. Coming Bies?"

"Uncle Eustace!"

The Gnome mage looked round, to see a little girl with a healthy pair of lungs barrel down towards him. Dropping his staff, he grabbed Bieslook under the arms and lifted her into the air. Lenna stood a way off, grinning.

"Eustace?"

Grand Master Wizard Trainer Eustace walked up to Lenna. He turned to Bieslook.

"Now my girl, I've told you. Nobody fears the dread mage Eustace. That's why I call myself Magis. It's more, what?"

"Sor-ce-rous," said Bieslook.

"Precisely. Have *you* thought of a name yet?"

"Howl," said Bieslook.

"Hmm. Good name, but isn't that more of a boy's name?"

Bieslook's face fell.

"I *liked* it. I want a walking castle."

"Oh well. Plenty of time, girl."

He gently set Bieslook down on the ground.

"Good morning, Miss Greenhollow. It's been a while."

"Mrs. Steambender, these days, Teacher."

"You're married? Excellent! Grown all respectable then? There were times when I did despair."

"Yeah," said Lenna, not wishing to go into details.

"I heard about Vernon," said Magis Sparkmantle. "I will miss him."

"Yes. He sacrificed himself so that Bieslook could live."

"I thought he might do something like that. They say that the difference between bravery and foolishness is timing. My brother did always have a good sense of timing."

Lenna simply nodded, and said nothing.

"So Mrs. Steambender, what can I do for you?"

"Well, you're Bieslook's next of kin. So we thought, maybe she'd be better off with her family than with us."

Magis Sparkmantle looked at his niece's face, somewhat sticky from the apple juice but otherwise perfectly adorable. He shook his head.

"Our parents are no longer with us, and neither are Iris'. I think Iris had a brother, but I'm not sure little Bieslook even knows him, and I can't take her in, really I can't. I am to go into battle when we re-take Gnomeregan, and many times before that. It will be dangerous. Orphaning her yet again would be unhelpful."

Lenna nodded.

"So apart from you, she has no family at all? Friends?"

Sparkmantle sighed, shook his head.

"Actually, looking at the two of you together, I don't think she'd even want to leave."

Bieslook's eyes suddenly grew large as saucers.

"Leave? Do I have to leave?"

Lenna kneeled in front of Bieslook.

"Well, that's why we went looking for Uncle Eustace, don't you remember?"

"You want me to *leave*?"

"Well, no, but..."

Bieslook wailed. She buried her face in Lenna's cloak and wrapped her arms round her middle, as far as she could reach, clutching as hard as she could.

"Don't want to leave!"

Magis Sparkmantle grinned at Lenna.

"What do you think *her* opinion is on the matter?"

Lenna sighed, put her hand on Bieslook's dark hair.

"You don't have to leave, sweetheart. You don't have to."

Bieslook sobbed.

"Don't want to leave."

Lenna gently, softly, put her fingers under Bieslook's chin, looked into her eyes.

"You don't have to." Tears were in Lenna's eyes.

"You can stay with us as long as you like."

Bieslook and Lenna looked at each other, Bieslook's lips still trembling. A hand appeared between them, rattling a paper bag.

"Jelly-baby? You can have two if you want."

"Thank you," said Lenna and Bieslook together.

Trixie walked into the mess hall, popularly known as "The Trough", steeling herself. She was certain, and things could only get worse if she waited too long. Her eyes searched for Barry. He wasn't in the spot where he usually was. "I'm sorry, Barry, but I don't think..." Oh damn. She'd never done this before. Let them off gently but firmly. She walked to the other end of the Trough.

She almost missed him. He was in a dark corner of the room. The reason she almost missed him was that he was staring deeply into the eyes of some blonde girl, talking to her in a low voice. Trixie's jaw dropped.

"What by the Titans..."

Barry looked round at Trixie.

"Uh, *what* by the Titans?"

Trixie waved a hand in the general direction of the girl.

"What by the Titans is *this*?"

Barry frowned.

"*This*, is a private conversation."

"But... What about last night?"

"Well, what *about* last night? You had fun didn't you?"

Trixie fell silent. Her eyes burnt.

"Oh come on," said Barry. "Just because we did it once doesn't mean you get to call yourself my *girlfriend*. I mean you've got nice tits and all, but I like girls who know their stuff, like Emily here."

Trixie cast a quick glance at the creature. Her hand was behind Barry's back. She looked up at Trixie and gave her a look that made Trixie's knuckles itch. Trixie looked back at Barry.

"Look," said Barry. "You were there, you were practically begging for it and I didn't mind. Nobody else around. Easy as two and two."

Trixie said nothing, for ten red hot seething seconds.

"Sod you and the ewe you rode in on."

Barry laughed.

"That would be you?"

Barry never knew how close a brush with death he'd had that moment, but some things are too bad even to blow up about. As if a switch had been thrown, Trixie flicked from seething to deadly calm. She bent over to Barry so she could whisper in his ear.

"See you at sword practice."

"Get lost, two-and-two."

Lenna walked into Griggin's shop, Bieslook in tow. Bieslook looked with gleaming eyes at the power-tools, hot pipes and sharp saws. Griggin lunged for her, sat down on a stool and pulled her onto his knee. He bounced her up and down, looking at Lenna.

"Found Magis Sparkmantle, then?"

Lenna nodded.

"What'd he say?"

"He said he was going to lead far too dangerous a life to take on a young girl. I think I believe him."

Bieslook squirmed, looking at the pretty glow under Griggin's lead melting crucible. Griggin pulled her closer.

"No other relatives?"

"Well, Magis hinted that she might have an uncle somewhere, on the Mother's side. But she doesn't know him." Lenna looked into Griggin's eyes. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I don't want to give her up."

Griggin looked down on Bieslook, who had, with impeccable timing, turned on her dreaded Aura of Cute. Griggin ruffled her hair.

"Do you think you can put up with us for a while longer?"

Bieslook cuddled up closer to Griggin. Griggin looked up at Lenna, held out his hand to her. Lenna sat down on Griggin's other knee. She wrapped her arms round her husband and Bieslook at the same time. The only sound that was heard was the faint gurgling of water in the pipes, and the hissing of steam. Lenna looked into Griggin's eyes.

"Sausage stew tonight. Don't be late."

Nix sat on his bed. A small lantern attached to the top bunk cast a gentle glow on the Embedded Writing and Drawing Surface on his knees. He was working on the blueprint for an unpickable lock. It was incredibly complex, which according to Dad usually meant that your design sucked. Nix didn't let that discourage him. Designs should always be as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Without any warning, a pink whirlwind entered the room, blew up the ladder to the bunk above Nix and settled with a thump that made Nix' light swing. Nix looked up at this unwelcome disturbance of his concentration.

"Oi! Easy! There's people trying to work here!"

"Sod you. Leave me alone."

Nix stared at the bed above him.

"Trix? What's up?"

"I said leave me alone."

Nix added two and two, and came up with Barry.

"Oh gods. Pothole on the road to bliss?"

"What part of 'leave me alone' *don't* you understand?"

"Fair enough," said Nix, and looked at his drawing, trying to catch the elusive idea in his head. His finger followed the lines. There was a thump above him. Nix looked up.

"Could you have a heartbreak *quietly*? This is complex stuff here."

"Shut up."

Nix looked back at his drawing, spotted a mistake and erased a few lines. Unfortunately, that meant that

several parts were now floating in mid-air, supported by nothing. Damn.

"Bastard."

Nix sighed, and rolled up his drawing. He put the Embedded Writing and Drawing Surface back in its place against the wall and lay back, eyes closed, bits of metal revolving in his mind. Great streams of Gloom came trickling down the wall. It would never work. It was all useless. A stupid idea in the first place. Nix sighed.

"I *told* you he was dodgy, didn't I?"

"Shut up."

"What's he done?"

There was a rush of bedclothes above and Trixie's face appeared.

"He's dropped me for some little blonde floozie, that's what."

Nix shrugged. "Hope they're happy together. Better off without him."

"Sod you. If I'd known, I'd have dropped him *before...*"

Trixie stopped, rolled back onto her bed. Nix frowned.

"Before what?"

"Nothing."

Nix stared into space.

"You didn't," he said. He thought again. "You did, didn't you?"

"Mind your own business."

"Suits me."

Trixie's face appeared again over the edge of the bed.

"*Don't* tell Mum and Dad."

"Fine," said Nix.

Trixie scowled. "And no weaseling by telling only Mum *or* Dad."

"Oh, would I?"

"Yes."

"Right, I will not tell anybody at all. Happy now?"

Trixie rolled back onto her back with a grunt. It was quiet for a moment.

"Thanks."

Nix lay back with his hands behind his head. What if he put moving parts in the key itself? In the bed above, Trixie stirred again.

"I should never have gone to that damn quarry."

"Quarry?"

"Sword practice on the Troggs there."

Nix took a deep breath.

"You know, I've never seen the point in blowing up frogs. You have to blow into something you stick up a frog's bum, it hurts the frog like hell, and as a reward, you have a round nearly dead frog."

"It was stupid."

Nix didn't see the point in either arguing or agreeing.

"Cheap booze, too," said Trixie.

"Always is," said Nix. "That's what you get with losers who can't afford the good stuff."

"Huh. *He* could, though. Too good to waste on the bumpkins, my foot."

"Trix, not that I'm defending the git, but that's no way of keeping out of trouble."

Trixie's voice sounded angry.

"I wasn't *trying* to keep out of trouble. It's just that he had to be such an arse about it afterwards."

Nix said nothing. There was the rustle of bedclothes above as Trixie turned over.

"So all afternoon, he's been finding other people to practice swords with. You'd almost think he didn't want

to play with me anymore."

"Imagine that," said Nix.

"Yeah. But he can't run away forever. One of these days, there's going to be nobody left to practice with but me."

There was a rustle as Trixie rolled onto her back, glaring at the ceiling.

"And then," she said, "I'll *hurt* him."

The Ironforge Gnomish Network for the Investigation of Thermal Energy stood in a semi-circle round their device. Its little wheel was spinning fast, and puffs of steam came out of the exhaust. They were all grinning at each other. Water from a large tank was being pumped down the shaft, down to where the rock was hot enough to boil it. Then, the steam would come back up through the second pipe, powering a normal steam engine. At the moment, that steam engine's energy was mainly used to pump down more water, but their calculations showed that the efficiency of the machine would increase as they scaled up. For now, though, all they needed to keep the wheel spinning was water.

"Lady and Gentlemen," said Griggin, "I think we have a proof of concept."

Chint grinned. Just because he could, he'd put a steam whistle on the thing. He pulled the chain, and the shrill tones of the three-tone whistle filled the small cavern.

"That's the signal for barrel time. First round is on me!"

Anton shook his head. "You all go. I've been up all night getting this ready, and I don't feel up to partying. I think I'll just take a few extra measurements, and head off."

Nix, Chint Waterspray, Griggin and Beatrice walked to the pub, talking about their machine. Now that their designs had proven sound, they could expand their vision. It was only a matter of time before all of Ironforge would have hot and cold running water, thanks to the hard work of I.G.N.I.T.E.

"Well the King has to say yes," said Nix. "And all *he'll* ask is if it's safe."

"To which we'll say that yes Sire, it certainly is," said Beatrice. "There really isn't anything that can go wrong. Mr. Stonehand's drills are doing a great job. We can measure how deep we need to drill by sending a bottle

of water down with the drill head. When the steam comes out, stop. Easy!"

"Yeah," said Nix. "And when the red hot lava comes out, you know you should have stopped a few minutes ago."

"Good point," said Chint. "Remember people, the youngest member *always* operates the drills." He put an arm round Nix' shoulder. "That'll get you lots of merit marks at your engineering classes."

Nix always liked it when his elders put their arms round his shoulder. Griggin gave him a Look.

"Give it back, Nix."

"*What?*"

"Whatever you took from Master Chint's pocket."

"Oh that's not fair! What makes you think..."

"Don't make me repeat myself," said Griggin.

Nix scowled, and handed Chint his wallet back.

"Just practicing, Sir."

Chint stared, took back his wallet and walked a few steps away from Nix. Beatrice giggled, and bent over Nix. She was wearing a rather low-cut blouse.

"I don't have my purse with me, but I won't expect you to believe that. Feel free to search me."

Nix turned red up to his ears and fled.

It was rather late when Mr. Firebrew finally turfed them out and they stood outside the Stonefire Tavern. Nix had a happy smile on his face, and was swaying on his legs. Chint was yawning. Griggin had allowed himself two pints of Thunderbrew, then switched to non-alcoholics. Demons make short work of drunken Warlocks, and a rampaging Voidwalker would quite have spoiled the evening. Beatrice was leaning against the wall, with her eyes closed. She slowly opened them and looked at each of her companions in turn.

"That wine was *nice*," she said. "I may have had a glass or two too many."

"Bottle," said Chint.

"Same difference," said Beatrice.

"Well, I'm off home," said Chint. "Remember Bee, lots and lots of water before you go to sleep."

"Pff! I'm an experienced lush. I laugh in the face of hangovers."

Griggin looked at Beatrice, a worried look on his face. The woman looked like she'd end up in a ditch if she tried to go home on her own. The problem was that

some of the ditches here were filled with molten rock. He waved Nix to him, and whispered in his ear.

"Can you make it home without me? I may have to assist Mrs. Glowpipe home."

Nix looked at his father.

"I'm Not drunk," he said. "What makes you think I can't find my way home?"

"I can count," said Griggin. "Three point four pints is one above your usual maximum. However, Mrs. Glowpipe may have exceeded her considerable maximum by a much higher margin."

"Don't worry," said Nix. "Want me to tell Mum where you're off to?"

"If you would," said Griggin.

Griggin half led, half carried Beatrice home. She leaned up against him, and Griggin could feel the heat of her body. Her face was flushed, and her long, light brown hair fell in waves over her shoulders, and in front of her eyes. She looked up at Griggin and smiled.

"I don't usually do this," said Beatrice, "But tonight is special."

"Really?"

"Yeah! We cracked it! We can make steam, darling! We can make the waters flow hot and cold!"

"We certainly can," said Griggin. He made some quick mental calculations. It should take him five and a half minutes to get this woman home and hand her over to her husband. He could do that. Beatrice stumbled, and Griggin had to grab her to keep her upright. She giggled, and grabbed his arm.

"Oh Griggin, where would I be without you?"

Good question, thought Griggin. They walked into Beatrice's street, and up to the stairs. Beatrice looked up at the stairs, and leaned back into Griggin.

"Oh boy," she said. "Here we go."

Beatrice took a few steps up the stairs, then swayed on her feet. Griggin jumped forward, took her by the shoulders and gave a mighty push. He frowned. He wasn't *built* for this kind of work. He had his Demonic personnel to get physical. He had lifting equipment in his workshop. You'd need some kind of chair on a rail to transport incapacitated people up the stairs. Or, you could simply avoid getting smashed. Counting the number of bottles you consumed was what the ancient Gods had invented mathematics for, after all. They managed somehow to get to the top of the stairs, and

Beatrice leaned her head against the door, fumbling for her keys. She opened the door.

"Wanna come in for a minute?"

Griggin opened his mouth to say 'no'. Beatrice's eyes looked back at him, moist.

"Please?"

Griggin took a breath, and followed her inside.

"Is Anton asleep already?"

Beatrice looked over her shoulder.

"Probably not," she said. She walked into the room. There was the hiss of gas and the clicking of the lighting mechanism, and with a little pop, the gas light came on. Griggin looked round. There was no sign of Mr. Glowpipe.

"He won't be back till early in the morning," said Beatrice.

Griggin looked at Beatrice's face. There was no anger in that look. The anger had long since gone. If there had been shouting, fighting, that, too, had long since spent itself. Only a lingering sadness remained. Griggin looked away, embarrassed.

"Hey."

Beatrice gave Griggin a little smile.

"I have to confess something."

"Confess?"

Beatrice walked slowly up to Griggin.

"I'm not as drunk as I looked back there."

"Um," said Griggin. That seemed to cover it.

She was very, very close now. Her eyes were dark brown, glowing at him with a fierce light. She put her hands on Griggin's shoulders, then round his neck. She pulled him closer, closing her eyes. Griggin raised his hand between them. Beatrice opened her eyes. Her hand was on Griggin's hair, fingers moving slowly. Griggin shook his head.

"Please?"

"I can't," said Griggin. "I don't want to."

Beatrice's eyes became moist.

"Just this once," she whispered.

"No."

"I won't tell. Honestly. I just want to feel someone's arms round me again. Feel wanted. I don't want to sleep alone. Not tonight."

Griggin gently put his hand on Beatrice's cheek.

"I wish I could help you. But I can't."

"Why not, damn it. Anton wouldn't mind even if I did tell him. He can hardly complain."

"Lenna," said Griggin. "Lenna would mind. It would destroy her."

"So don't tell her. What she doesn't know, can't hurt her."

"I have known her since I began to live. She would know. I would know, and that would be enough."

"What are you afraid of? That she'd shoot fireballs at you?"

Griggin's face became hard as stone. He dropped his hands by his side.

"I'm not afraid of Lenna's fireballs. What I'm most afraid of is the look in her eyes when I'd tell her. Her fireballs would be a mercy after that. I will not. I cannot." Griggin briefly closed his eyes. "I must go." He turned round to leave.

"Hey."

Griggin looked round. Beatrice had dropped her blouse to the floor, and stood there, half naked, looking at Griggin. Griggin shook his head sadly.

"I know," said Beatrice. "Just wanted you to know what you're missing."

"You're beautiful," said Griggin. "You deserve to be loved. But you're not mine, and I'm married. Good night, Beatrice."

Griggin softly walked into the bedroom, to find Lenna sprawled all over the bed, arms wide, asleep. He looked down on her. There was only about a quarter of the bed left. Try as he might, there was no way that he could curl up in such a small space. He dropped his clothes neatly on the chair, and gently took hold of Lenna's arm, trying to roll her over. She snorted in a most un-ladylike manner and woke up, grinned at Griggin.

"Oh look what the cat dragged in! Honestly Mr. Steambender. All-night boozing and womanising? I'd expect better of you."

Griggin sighed, and got in bed with her. He moved up close behind her, put his arms round her and pulled her to him. Lenna wriggled her bottom, but Griggin seemed a bit distracted.

"Lenna?"

"Hmm?"

"I am very glad I have you."

"And me. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"O good. Something's up with Trixie, though. She looks like one long streak of misery."

"Oh? Any idea what it can be?"

"Not a clue. Problems of the heart, trouble at school, general feelings of unpleasantness. Anything. But I will find out."

Griggin nodded, and wrapped his arms round Lenna in precisely the way that they fit so well, pressed his cheek against her hair.

"Good night, lief."

"Good night."

File GSB-060: Introspection

Anton and Griggin were sitting side by side on a bench in King Magni's throne room. Anton had a large cardboard roll on his knees, containing the designs for their hot water plant. It also had detailed drawings of their existing proof-of-concept machine that was still chugging away merrily in their small workshop in Tinkertown. Anton fidgeted, looking at some dark-haired Human woman talking to the King.

Griggin stared ahead of him, only now and then glancing at Anton. Time and again, the words "It's Not Your Business" came back to him. He could hardly claim any moral high grounds himself. He sighed. The woman's audience showed no sign of slowing down. In front of them were a group of Dwarves wearing strange signs on their tabards, carrying a large coffer. At this rate it was doubtful they'd be admitted to the King before nightfall.

"Hope they sort themselves out soon," said Anton. "I need to take Beatrice out somewhere nice tonight."

Griggin looked at Anton, and said nothing. Not Your Business.

"You know what women are like, when you forget your anniversary."

Warlocks, by necessity, have extraordinary control over their facial expressions. Griggin didn't move a muscle. He thought back. He could easily recall the date of their wedding, but what he remembered most was the look in Lenna's eyes as she stood before him in her off-white dress (to signify her not-exactly-purity), looking at him. Warlocks were not very popular among Gnomes, and regrettably with good reason. She hadn't cared. She'd looked at him as if he were her soul's salvation. She'd told him that if it weren't for him, she'd be lying in a ditch somewhere now. She was probably right, but really all Griggin had done was take her home after a particularly bad night, and put her in his bed, which at least was clean. He'd spent the night reading Mekgineer Steamrigger's collected essays on the construction of two-way steam valves, occasionally looking at her face as she slept. That night, as he carried her home, she'd occasionally murmured things like "My Hero", and "How can I ever repay you". The next morning, she didn't seem to remember much of

that, but was quite appreciative of the several gallons of water and fruit juice, and a breakfast. Griggin had gone without. She'd given him a hug and a smile that he could still remember, and disappeared.

"Ah. There she goes," said Anton. The Human woman had finally concluded her business with the King, and walked off, looking not much happier than when she'd come in. The Dwarves walked up, with proper demeanor, observing all the proprieties. Their leader addressed the king in Old Dwarvish, of which Griggin could recognise only a few words. King Magni responded in the same language.

"Tax gatherers," said Anton. "Oh no! They're pulling out the scrolls. Wish I'd brought a pillow. We're going to be here for a while."

Griggin sighed, forcing himself not to dislike Anton too much. It really wasn't any of his business how he and Beatrice sorted out their lives. He thought of Lenna instead. After that first quiet night with her, he'd seen her here and there. She was a popular girl. Promising fire mage, life and soul of any group she was in. Completely out of Griggin's league. Griggin wasn't even in any league. He was your basic steampunk, tinkering with his machines, knowing to within the last fractured

inch how to fit one pipe into its socket, but when it came to girls... yeah. Even at that early age, he could already make metal flow in his fingers. Whatever he set out to make usually worked, with a bit of friendly persuasion now and then. Which impressed young and attractive girls not even a little bit. He could of course have done what one of his fellow apprentice engineers had done, with a bit of leftover copper tubing, a spring-loaded mini-motor and an eccentric wheel. That *had* impressed a few girls. Unfortunately, one of the devices had found its way to the teacher's desk. A Meaningful Conversation had taken place, and manufacture of the Personal Massagers had stopped abruptly. Griggin's fellow student had been philosophical about it. As he put it, his device allowed girls to have fun by themselves, which was a big design flaw.

And then came the day that Lenna Greenhollow visited him, out of the blue, at home. She hadn't been in the best of moods, and had wanted to talk with someone who wasn't interested in getting her clothes off. Griggin had sighed, made her a cup of tea, listened to her tale of woe. Someone had *totally* done something that she *really* should know better than to do

to her, with someone she didn't really have feelings for, but only... Griggin had let the words wash over him for a while. Ye gods, he was the Friend To Talk To. To this day, he still didn't know what had come over him, but he'd launched into a ten-minute rant, starting with the words: 'What in the *world* makes you think that I *don't* want to...' Lenna had simply sat there, mouth hanging open, big eyes staring at him. After five seconds' pregnant pause, she'd got up, screamed something about men being all the same and stormed out. Griggin had felt strangely satisfied by that, and absolutely positive that he'd never see her again.

"Get on with it," said Anton. "Here's the gold, here's the receipt, thank you very much, sod off."

"Quite," said Griggin, thoughts miles away.

By that time, though, he was starting to have troubles of his own. Dreams. Nightmares. Whispers of being consumed, with not even death an escape from suffering. Warlocks are born with their mental connection to what was called the Wild Nethers, where Daemon spirits dwelt, alien, malignant, ever hungry for souls to steal for the Light only knew what purpose. When a child was born, cursed with such a connection, it was only a matter of time before he was found. Then

the whispers would start, poisoning the unwary Warlock child's mind, assailing him from within his own skull, from within his own thoughts, so subtle and so skillful that some never realised that the images and thoughts were not their own. Many young Warlocks were overcome before they knew what hit them. They would often go insane, going on killing sprees, their own families their first victims, until they were brought down. Fallen Warlocks were executed without remorse.

The Gnomeregan Warlock society was founded after some particularly bad episodes. They gave themselves the unenviable task of finding Warlocks and teaching them how to keep their inner and outer Daemons at bay. The first years were bad. Simply convincing the parents to hand over their children to the Circle was a challenge. People didn't know the first thing about Daemons, and thought the children might respond well to a firm hand and loving care and attention. What they really needed was a fighting chance to overcome the voices in their heads, and once more to be the captain of their souls. The first attempts had failed, badly. The children had been 'put beyond the reach of the Daemons', as they put it. With a ceremonial dagger, all right and proper.

Then, the new methods of teaching had arrived. No longer was it necessary to make a possessed Warlock-apparent try to concentrate on learning the spells needed to control the Daemons. Trainers could simply reach into the minds of pupils, and put the essential knowledge there. It had been salvation for many, including Griggin, even though it came at a price. You were saved from death, but you signed on for life, and were made to swear to help save others in the same way that you had been saved. Made to subscribe to all of their rules, most of which they wouldn't even tell you. And you could never leave, on pain of death.

"Oh gods. This is going to take forever," said Anton.

"You will belong to the Circle forever," mumbled Griggin.

Anton looked round. "What?"

"Nothing."

Griggin had wanted to leave. He hadn't *asked* for the power to bind dark creatures from the Wild Nethers to his will. He hadn't asked for Daemons to try and invade his mind. He was an intelligent Gnome. He could see why he was made to do the things given to him. But that was the Mind, the Intellect. Daemons didn't care

about the intellect. They went straight for the under-minds, straight for lust, desire, hunger, fear. Griggin had simply wanted to hide under a warm blanket and pretend none of it was happening. His trainer had been harsh. Griggin had hated him from the very core of his being. Trainer had not been impressed, and pushed on mercilessly. With time, Griggin came to realise that he must learn or die. It was not the obvious choice it might seem to be. Even with the knowledge to keep himself alive, he would not have his soul all to himself. He might be the captain, but other creatures had high-ranking officer's positions, and mutiny was always a possibility. There was, of course, the third possibility. He could neither live nor die, but fall. Offer himself to the Daemons, or rather, through inaction, allow himself to be taken. His trainer had described to him what would happen if Griggin took that option. The slow steady destruction of his mind, his sanity, his self. Trainer could have saved himself the effort. The voices in Griggin's head were much more eloquent, much more cruel, and could describe their intentions with perfect, terrifying clarity. As long as Griggin would live, to fall would be a possibility.

Griggin had taken a deep breath, looked at the world he must live in, and decided. At the very top of the Gnomeregan Cavern, there was a place where you could see all the way to the bottom of the Hall of Gears. Trying to shut out his thoughts, Griggin walked up the ramps, climbed the ladders, until he came to the hole underneath one of the heavy cranes, that could lift the massive gears used in Gnomeregan's infrastructure. He closed his eyes, then made himself look down. It would take approximately fifteen seconds to fall from the top of the hall to the floor. Death would be instant. Were fifteen seconds long enough to fall? Griggin walked to the edge, closed his eyes, steadied his breathing.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

Griggin jumped out of his skin, and almost fell down the hatch, which would have been embarrassing. He managed to balance himself, and looked behind him. Sitting on one of the machines, a flask of tea on one side, a book in her hands, was Lenna Greenhollow. Griggin stared at her, struggling to find words. 'I was going to kill myself to avoid my soul being consumed by Daemons' didn't seem to be appropriate.

"Um, I wanted to get away from it all," said Griggin.

"Good place for it," said Lenna. "I come here all the time, when I need some time to myself, to think. Nobody ever comes here."

Griggin nodded, and said nothing.

"You just need to be careful not to come up here when they're using the megaton crane, or you'll just *die* of the noise."

Griggin winced as Lenna dog-eared the page of the book she was reading. You don't *do* that to works of literature such as... Griggin looked at the title. 'Summer of Passion'. Oh. Alright then.

"Hey, about what you said the other day. I've been thinking." Lenna looked into Griggin's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say you were, like, not into girls or something."

Griggin blinked.

"Um, that's quite alright. I am. Into girls, that is. Just not at this very moment. Not that I don't find you, um... But I don't mean..." He trailed off.

"Heh. But I shouldn't just have dropped all my troubles on you." Lenna grinned. "Not without offering anything in return, at least."

"Um yes," said Griggin. "I mean, no."

Lenna looked at Griggin. Then, she picked up her flask.

"Tea?"

Griggin took a deep breath.

"Yes please."

Somebody poked Griggin in the side.

"We're up," said Anton.

Trixie was lying on her bunk, on her back, eyes closed, hands behind her head. The last of her drawings (Kingsblood in its various stages of development), were done. Hand them in tomorrow, and that would be another few points, and herbalism done with. People always thought that picking flowers and gathering herbs was a bit sissy, until Trixie reminded them that those herbs were ingredients for strength potions, mana potions and many other things that would get you thrown out of any sporting match. Academically speaking, all was well at school.

In any other way you could think off, things sucked. Trixie had never been what she'd call popular, despite her charming, pleasant and gentle ways. Ever since the

episode with Barry and the other Troggs, her reputation was below freezing. She'd made no secret of what she thought of the Epic Battle of Gol'Bolar Quarry, which for some reason annoyed the people who thought slaughtering a few defenceless Troggs was a quest of only slightly less epic proportion than stealing fire from the Gods. To add to this, Barry Blackknife kept implying that she was both willing to lie down and open her legs to any boy who asked, and at the same time no good in bed. There were people at school who didn't even know that she had any other name but "Two-and-two". Bloody unfair. She'd only done it once, and that was with none other than Mr. Blackknife. Nobody wanted to talk to her, except occasionally to make suggestions to her that warranted a steel boot in the groin. Not that she particularly wanted to talk to, or even, Light forbid, get *close* to any of her classmates, but still.

Mum was calling to her, something about going out and Bieslook.

Trixie called back: "Yes, Mum."

She turned round, facing the wall. Nobody wanted her, and the feeling was mutual. Sod them all. There was a noise behind her, some unsteady stumbles, and then Bieslook's scared voice.

"Trixie!"

Trixie jumped up, nearly bumping her head on the ceiling, and saw Bieslook at the top of the ladder to her bunk. One of her legs had slipped between the rungs, and she couldn't pull herself up.

"Bies! Be careful!"

Trixie grabbed Bieslook by the back of her dress, and hoicked her up onto the bed. She pointed at Bieslook's shoes, and she pulled them off. No shoes on the bed.

"What's up, Bies?"

"Lenna's gone to get more milk. You have to keep me from being kidnapped by Trolls for the pot."

"Oh great."

"But there aren't any Trolls in Ironforge, so it's an easy job."

"Good," said Trixie. She lay back down, and closed her eyes.

There was a moment of silence as Bieslook looked at Trixie. Trixie felt Bieslook's hand on her leg, and she looked up.

"You are sad," said Bieslook. "Why are you sad?"

"Nobody likes me," said Trixie.

"That's not true," said Bieslook. "I like you."

Trixie looked at the young girl.

"People are nasty to me."

Bieslook frowned, and raised her hands. "Want me to shoot fireballs-at-dawn at them? That'll teach them!"

Trixie stared, then fell back in the pillows laughing. For some reason, it was impossible to stay angry when Bieslook was around.

"I can, you know?"

Trixie put her hand on Bieslook's hair. "No. It gives you headaches. Those bastards aren't worth it."

Bieslook blinked. "What's a bastard?"

"Bad word," said Trixie. "Sorry."

"Are they pulling your hair?"

Trixie shook her head.

"Stealing your money?"

"No."

"What then?"

Trixie fell silent. They were calling her a slut. They were keeping her out of their circle. Every one of their words, every one of their looks, every one of their gestures, was meant to tell her: We don't like you. You are not one of us. You are unclean. You have broken the rules. You are worthless. Filth. No wonder you fall

over for any boy who can hold his breath long enough to be near you. Trixie looked at her adopted little sister, and blinked.

"They won't let me play with them."

Bieslook crawled across the bed, grabbed Trixie's arm and looked into her eyes.

"I'll play with you."

Trixie looked at Bieslook's face, large blue eyes staring at her, worried. Trixie reached out and touched Bieslook's face.

"Thank you," she said.

Bieslook beamed. "We can be sisters! I've never had a sister! You can be my big sister, and I won't get a little sister, and that's good because little sisters are nothing but trouble!"

Trixie grinned. "We can be blood-sisters. We swear a blood-oath and we'll be each other's best friend. Only we'll skip the bit where we cut each other's hand with a knife, because that hurts like hell and Mum would kill us both if she saw it."

Bieslook nodded seriously. Then, she spat on her hand and held it out to Trixie. Trixie looked at Bieslook's hand. Oh what the hell. She spat on her own

hand and shook Bieslook's. Bieslook laughed, lay down next to Trixie and put her head on Trixie's shoulder.

Trixie wiped her hand on the blanket.

"I'm glad you're my sister," said Bieslook.

Trixie put her arm round Bieslook's shoulder. "So am I."

They lay still, for a few moments. Bieslook stirred.

"Trixie?"

"You have to say Big Sister now," said Trixie.

"Oh. Big Sister?"

"Yes, Little Sister?"

"Will I get boobies?"

Trixie looked at Little Sister, raising her eyebrows.

"Is this going to be the talk about where baby Gnomes come from? Because if it is, you can just go and talk to Mum. I'm not in the mood to talk about it."

"No," said Bieslook. "Baby Gnomes are made by the Titans and brought home on the Strider. Just boobies."

"Hm. Well, they grow slowly, like trees."

"I don't want boobies. Boys wil just look at them. My eyes are up here, boyo."

Trixie snorted, then fell back onto the pillow laughing.

"Ye gods, Bies. Where *do* you get those things from?"

"Don't know."

Trixie looked into Bieslook's eyes, still giggling. She put her arms round her little sister and hugged her close.

It was late, and Mum came back, climbed up the ladder. Trixie put her finger on her lips, and pointed. Bieslook was lying next to her, head on her shoulder, fast asleep. Mum grinned, and quietly climbed down. Trixie lay back, quietly, so as not to disturb Bieslook. Her eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. The most amazing thought had just occurred to her. It was the kind of thing teachers would say in lessons where attention was dropping, and students needed a bit of shaking up. She'd always let the words pass her by, because she knew, of course, that she was immortal. But this time, she felt it in her bones, and she would never be the same girl again. The words fought to the surface of her mind, wanting to be spoken, if only in a whisper.

"I *would* die to protect you," said Trixie.

Nix stood on top of the Stonewrought Dam, which was a dam, wrought of stone. Dwarves were really good at names. This particular dam was on the northern edge of Loch Modan, and kept the Loch from turning the equally well-named Wetlands to the North from turning into the Shallow Lake. In front of him stood his examiner of the day, Hulfdan Blackbeard.

Blackbeard, a Dwarf, towered over him. He looked every bit a Rogue, leather-clad, black hair, beard and mustache, and a face that explained perfectly to Nix why he wouldn't want to be seen most of the time.

"Right. Steambender? You're up. Here's your assignment. You are to leave this dam to the East, in the direction of the Mo'grosh Ogre mound. From the moment your dirty little feet leave this dam, till ye get back on it, keep yer hide out of sight. We've got spotters in the area, and if one of 'em catches sight of ye, then that's a fail. That clear?"

"Yes, *Sir!*"

Blackbeard frowned.

"Think yer *smart*, Steambender?"

"Yes, *Sir!*"

Blackbeard bent down over Nix, scowling.

"The fail rate on this run, mister Steambender, is three quarters. Of those three quarters, half don't make it back. And that's just the way we like it. Culls the fools from the company and makes sure that the few who do make it are Dwarves that we can send on important errands."

"Yes Sir!"

"Now there's Kobolds in the area, little tunnel rats, you'll like them. There's Troggs of the Stonesplinter Clan, and of course Mo'grosh Ogres. We want evidence that you met them all. Whether you do that by picking their pockets, or knocking their blocks off, we don't care. Finally, you are to go into the Mo'grosh ogre mound and kill Chok'sul, head of the Mo'grosh Ogres. That clear?"

"Aye Sir!"

"Then why can I still see ye? Be off with ye!"

Keeping out of sight was easy. Nix' trainer, not this bully of a Dwarf, thank the Gods, but a Gnomeregan Gnome named Fenthwick, had taught him to wrap the shadows round him. Nix looked round, hoping to spot any of the spotters Blackbeard had mentioned, and pick their pockets. He looked round at the noise of

running feet. Ah. Four, no five Kobolds, little rat-like creatures whose main line of business was mining the places that others had mined before, and petty theft. They were running to the West, probably making for the abandoned mines there. Nix picked up a rock and ran after them.

He caught up with the Kobolds in a few minutes, took careful aim and threw his rock at the Kobold who was running at the front. He grinned. Headshot! The Kobold stood still, glaring at his mates.

"Who do that?"

"Not me!"

"You lie! Can tell! Lips move!"

"You awake. If me, you be sleeping now."

"Crows peck your eyes out if you lie!"

"You got kaka under candle!"

"I give you kaka!"

At that point, the argument moved from the verbal to the tactile, until the other two leapt on the fighting pair and pulled them apart. While this was going on, Nix crept quietly behind one of the Kobolds who was standing there watching the discussion, and performed a textbook retrieval of a small bottle of mana potion. It'd

have to do.

Nix flitted from shadow to shadow, grinning to himself. Kobolds are stupid. Who's next? A noise made Nix stop and look. Something was moving, sheltered in a hollow behind some shrubs. He sneered. Dwarves. They were being uncharacteristically careful, filling a barrel with some kind of powder, and adding drops of liquid from a bottle. Probably one of their explosive devices, used in mining. Life was about to get noisy. Nix got ready to move on, then changed his mind and grinned to himself. He concentrated deep, feeling the silence, sensing the wind, the rustle of trees. He became the silence, and moved forward like a spirit, unseen, unheard. None of the Dwarves ever noticed him there, as he carefully relieved one of the dwarves of a few sheets of paper. When he was at a safe distance, he chuckled, put the paper in his bag and continued.

The afternoon was getting on when Nix arrived at the Ogre mound. He was on a small hill overlooking the entrance, sun in his back, plotting his way round the many Ogres who walked round, unaware of Nix' presence. His conclusion was that any amateur could enter that cave by night. Doing it in full daylight was a

proper challenge for a soon-to-be Journeyman Rogue. He'd have to skirt round, climb to the top of the entrance, then lower himself just behind the guards. Would he be able to pull that off? The Ogres looked big and stupid, but that didn't mean they were deaf and blind. The weapons they wielded, with as much ease as Nix wielded one of his daggers, were about as heavy as Nix was himself. Being spotted was not good if he wanted to retain all three of his dimensions. He already knew how he'd bring down Chok'sul. He'd bought extra strength poison, and applied a double dose to a dagger reserved specially for the purpose. If he was lucky, Chok'sul would be dead before he'd even notice Nix. If not, Nix had plenty of tricks up his sleeve to add to his luck. He had practiced them on his fellow students, using sticks instead of knives, because the school couldn't afford to lose too many students. All the students had shuddered, the first time it was explained to them which particular weak points in the bodies were targeted with each attack. Many moves were especially meant to keep the enemy from moving by causing him pain, keeping him from breathing or blinding him. In assassination, there really was no such thing as a fair fight. The most kindness you showed your target was

to get it over with as quickly as you could. Nix' eyes narrowed, and he moved.

Gnomes, much like Dwarves, are used to moving round underground. They have the grit of mountains dissolved in their blood, and they have the night vision of owls. The Ogres' cave was lit with torches here and there. Cooking fires were burning. Nix tried not to think what, or who, might be roasting on those fires as he stalked through the sandy caves, keeping perfectly still when Ogres passed by. They were large. Larger than a Dwarf. Taller than a Human. Nix could have run between their legs without touching... um, yeah. Best not to continue that thought. Chok'sul would be the largest of them all. Ogres followed the biggest and strongest of them, until they were no longer the biggest and strongest. Meritocracy at its most violent. Nix was about to cause a change of management.

He found the right cave after maybe half an hour of creeping about in the gloom, and slipping past a pair of two-headed spellcasters. The moment you first set eyes on your target, living, breathing, unaware of the fact that soon, their lives would be at an end, was always special. Even the most experienced assassins, with dozens, even hundreds of kills to their name, still

felt something, a threshold, a decision, the Universe going one way, and not the other. The finger of Death raised in the air, ready to point at the one, or the other. Nix hid in a small hollow that might have been used for a fire, or to store supplies or weapons. He looked at Chok'sul.

Chok'sul was fighting someone. Another Ogre was attacking him, fists pounding on Chok'sul's chest, or being blocked by his massive forearms. Nix blinked as Chok'sul took a mighty punch to the head, and staggered backwards. He bellowed, and rushed forward. With the speed of the very strong, he punched his attacker in the stomach twice, then in the face. He placed his hands on his attacker's chest and shoved, with all his weight behind the push. Chok'sul's attacker was thrown backwards, stumbled and fell to his back. Chok'sul's foot came down on the other Ogre's stomach. Chok'sul took a step backward while the other fought to breathe, then raised his hands in the air in a gesture of resign, knowing he'd been beaten.

Chok'sul threw back his head and laughed, making the cave echo. He stepped forward, held out his hand to his assailant, then pulled him to his feet and hugged him to his chest, rapping his knuckles on the back of

the other's head. Then, he held the other at arm's length by his shoulders and grinned at him, speaking words in Ogre. He slapped the other's shoulder.

Nix' jaw dropped, as he understood. He started shaking. Oh *crap!* This was not supposed to happen. Targets should be fierce, and evil, and bad, preparing to do the terrible deeds you were sent here to prevent. They weren't supposed to be congratulating their... their *son* on a good attempt at de-throning them! Nix looked at the blade in his hand. He had first polished it to a shine and sharpened it, till he could have shaved himself with it. Then, he had held it over the flame of a candle to cover it with soot, so that it wouldn't be seen. Finally, he had coated the edge with a poison that would kill a boar with the tiniest scratch, and probably anyone stupid enough to eat that boar as well. Nix' breath started to shiver, and he closed his eyes briefly, steadying himself. Just a dozen or so yards ahead, Chok'sul and two of his mates were laughing and joking with Chok'sul Junior. Nix closed his eyes. This was going to cost him his paper, but he knew he'd already decided. He put away his blade, and without a sound, he turned round and slipped out of the cavern.

"Right, let's have you," said Hulfdan Blackbeard. "Evidence please." Nix laid out the things he had taken from the various inhabitants of the area. The bottle of mana potions he'd taken from the Kobold, the piece of paper he'd taken from the Dwarves, some Ogre's woollen handkerchief, enough to make a shirt out of for a Gnome.

Blackbeard nodded. "Right. Bloody cheek to go thieving from good honest Dwarves. Now for the big one. Chok'sul. Is he dead?"

Nix looked at the ground, then up at Blackbeard's face.

"No, Sir."

Blackbeard glared at Nix.

"What? You have the gall to come back here, you little runt, and tell me that that murdering bastard is still breathing? Which part of 'kill the sod' did ye need explaining?"

Nix looked at his feet, and said nothing.

"I asked ye a question, you useless little git! Why didn't you top him off like it said in yer assignment?"

Nix slowly turned his face up to Hulfdan Blackbeard.

"Got scared, Sir. Couldn't do it."

Blackbeard scowled down on Nix.

"That's a fail, Steambender. Go change yer trousers and don't come back till ye grow some backbone. Get out of my sight."

Blackbeard looked at the back of one of Nix' classmates, disappearing into the gloom. What by the Light had possessed his masters to allow those useless little Gnomes to try and do a Dwarf's work? Of the half of them that made it back, most of them managed to bugger up their job in some way or another. Best to go with Dwarves all the way. His eyes fell on Nix' items of evidence. Wool, potion, paper. What was it anyway? He picked up the piece of paper, and unfolded it. He frowned, turned over the paper, then turned it over again. No matter how he looked at it, it was still a drawing of the very Stonewrought Dam he was standing on right now. Three positions on the dam had been marked with crosses. Blackbeard's eyes fell on a few words on the paper.

Fifty pounds of Seaforium on marks one and two.
Eighty on mark three. Detonate in order.

"Bloody hell!"

Hulfdan Blackbeard ran off to the Dam authorities, hoping he wasn't too late.

"Does my bum look big in this?"

Lenna looked over her shoulder at her husband. This was a really nice dress, and she was shamelessly exploiting the indestructible good mood Griggin was in. Griggin's eyes gleamed at her, and a big grin was on his face.

"Yess," he said.

Lenna raised a menacing eyebrow.

"I like large posteriors," said Griggin, "And I cannot prevaricate."

"Hmmm..."

She looked at the dress again, blue satin, simple, elegant, without frills but very well made. A little more low-cut and figure-hugging than she was used to, and the heart shape sown in was a bit too sweet and cute, but it wasn't a dress for day-to-day work anyway.

"Take it," said Griggin. "You look great in it."

Lenna took a deep breath and wrapped her arms round Griggin.

"Don't you mean without it?"

"Well, I can't take you out without it," said Griggin, glancing down.

"What, a fancy new dress *and* lunch? Are we made of money?"

"We have just been commissioned by His Majesty King Magni Bronzebeard to provide hot and cold running water for the whole inner circle of Ironforge. We can afford it."

"Sorry dear, I didn't quite hear that. Could you say that again?"

"His Majesty, King Magni Bronzebeard, wants us to install hot and cold water facilities, pumps, piping, heat exchangers, the lot!"

Lenna looked into Griggin's eyes, and ran a finger down his cheek.

"Ah right. So I did hear you right then. Or at least it is the same thing you told me before."

"Yes," said Griggin.

"And the time before that."

"I'm afraid so."

"So you're sure it isn't that you've found some floozie or other and want to ease your conscience?"

Griggin looked into the middle distance.

"Ye gods no. I'd never do that to you. I've seen Beatrice."

"Beatrice?"

Griggin winced. "Sorry, dear. I shouldn't have said that."

"No? So what's up with Beatrice?"

"Let's not talk about it here," said Griggin, looking round. "Like the dress?"

Lenna looked at Griggin's face.

"Yes."

Griggin pulled out his wallet.

Lenna looked at Griggin through the bubbles in her sparkling apple juice. She took a deep breath.

"Anton is cheating on Beatrice. Oh my."

Griggin took a small sip of coffee, and nodded.

"Has been for a long time. She knows, he knows she knows, and so on."

"Poor woman," said Lenna.

"I'm sure she's not completely innocent," said Griggin.

Lenna cut off a piece of bacon, speared some egg and finally a piece of toast. She swept up some of the sauce.

"Not even new-born babies are," she said, with her mouth full. "Kicking Mummy even before they're born."

Griggin looked into Lenna's eyes, hesitating.

"She made a pass at me," he said, finally.

Lenna's eyes were fixed on Griggin, fork motionless between mouth and plate. Griggin looked into Lenna's eyes, shook his head. Lenna smiled.

"I knew you wouldn't."

"I never would."

"Beatrice's boobs are larger than mine," said Lenna. "Weren't you the least bit tempted?"

"I've been tempted by creatures more adept at it than any Gnome," said Griggin. "Not a chance."

"So what happened?"

Griggin took a deep breath. "Well, two weeks ago we were celebrating our success with the prototype. Alcohol was involved, and I thought Beatrice wouldn't make it home alone, so I took her."

Lenna laughed. "Oh my. The old get-drunk-and-look-helpless trick? What sort of woman

does that sort of thing?"

"Well, quite," said Griggin. "So I found myself in her apartment, Anton wasn't there, but she was."

"And she flung herself at you?"

Griggin nodded. Lenna finished her drink, waved for another.

"Not that I'm complaining, but why didn't you?"

Lenna's eyes gleamed. "And if the words 'I love only you' are involved somewhere, I'll drag you home and do incredibly perverse things with you. Kids are at school."

Griggin stared at his empty plate, thinking. Lenna's foot touched his under the table.

"She was drunk," he said, finally. "Not as thought as she drunk she was, but still. She wasn't really interested in me, just in something Gnome-shaped and warm. I do feel for her pain and misery, but that's not a good reason. I couldn't have comforted her." Griggin frowned. "And I'm *not* a temporary stop-gap measure."

"And?"

Griggin put down his cup and grinned at Lenna. "And I *would* like you to drag me home and do incredibly perverse things to me."

They left the tavern with purpose in their steps, giggling. Suddenly, Lenna stopped, put her hands on Griggin's shoulders and looked at him.

"I know why you didn't."

"I do love only you."

Lenna laughed, shook her head. "She was trying to manipulate you. To own you. Nobody does that to you. You're too stubborn."

"Nobody except you," said Griggin.

"Go me," said Lenna.

File GSB-061: Inspiration

"Spill."

Lenna pushed a mug of hot chocolate over to Trixie. A few biscuits were on a saucer next to it. Trixie put her hands round the mug, said nothing.

"Come on, sweetheart. I can see something's bothering you. Maternal instincts. That, and your face looks like you've eaten nothing but lemons for a week. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah right. Think I was born yesterday?"

"Don't wanna talk about it."

"School?"

"Whuh."

"That boy I've seen you around with? Boyfriend trouble?"

Trixie looked up from under her pink hair. Black was starting to show up at the roots. She'd have to get it dyed again soon.

"He is *not* my boyfriend."

"Is that the 'Nothing' that's up?"

"Gods, *no*."

Lenna looked at Trixie as she hunched over her mug, avoiding her eyes. She put her hand on Trixie's arm. Her muscles felt hard underneath her skin, like cables, from all her sword practice. Lenna's young daughter was being forged, moulded into something altogether more scary than just a cute pink-haired Gnome girl.

"What'd he do to you?"

"Nothing."

"Look at me, Trixie."

Trixie's eyes looked up at her mother, gleaming more than usual. For all her strength, Trixie could still be hurt. Quite easily.

"Whatever you've got up to, girl, believe me, I've done it, too." Lenna smiled. "And if I haven't, congratulations on being more original than me. That's not easy."

A small glimmer of a laugh passed over Trixie's face, and then faded away. Lenna took Trixie's hand between hers, gently stroking it.

"First time?"

Trixie closed her eyes, and Lenna could feel Trixie's hand tighten on hers. She nodded, looking down, not daring to meet Lenna's eyes.

"Was it good?"

Pause. Shake of the head. Lenna swallowed.

"I need to ask you, sweetheart. It's an important question. Jail time important."

Trixie looked up.

"He didn't make me," she said.

Lenna let go a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. Thank goodness.

"Sweetheart, the first time is never the best, you know? It takes practice, just like anything else."

"I am *not* going to practice with Barry sodding Blackknife."

"Good," said Lenna. "Why not?"

"The bastard has been telling tales all over the school. About how easy I am. How I'm begging for it. How crap I am in bed. Yeah, Two-and-two? Just get her drunk and she'll roll over just like that."

"Oh, that's not true."

"Still makes me feel like shit. Maybe I am just shit."

Lenna didn't often get angry, and unless you knew her very well, you might never notice. Usually, she could see the funny side of any situation and joke her way through it. Easier for all concerned.

Her eyes burnt with fire at her daughter.

Trixie looked down. "Language. Sorry, Mum. Now I've made you angry too."

"Yes, you *have* pissed me off," said Lenna. "But not because you *said* shit, but because you're *talking* shit."

Trixie looked up aghast. She hadn't heard her mother swear like that since...

"You, young lady, are a smart, beautiful, promising young Gnome girl. You are kind to your fellow Gnomes, strong, and I don't know anyone with more courage than you have. Whenever I see you walk by, I marvel that your father and I could have put such a Gnome into this world, and I want to point you out to anyone who'll listen and say, do you see her? That's my daughter! Don't you *dare* sell yourself short like that."

"But..."

"Yes, you get on my nerves something rotten sometimes. But you are my daughter, and I'm proud that I am your mother."

Trixie stared, biting her lip.

"Now this boy, Is he bothering you?"

Trixie nodded.

"Can you beat the stuffing out of him till he stops?"

Trixie shook her head. Stupid rules.

"Then get your sorry butt out of that class, and into the next where the losers can't follow you."

"So how did it go, son?"

"Flunked," said Nix.

"What? That is unexpected. Did someone spot you?"

"No, Dad."

"Then what? Did your target escape?"

"Not exactly," said Nix.

Griggin put an arm round Nix' shoulders as they walked up the path to Ironforge. The sun turned the rolling, snow-covered hills into a field of sparkling diamonds, untouched since the making of the World. Their breath blew ahead of them in small clouds of steam.

"Come on, tell me. What happened?"

Griggin looked at Nix, waiting patiently for him to compose his thoughts. Nix looked up.

"Dad, he's got a son. Chok'sul. He's got a son." Nix looked up at Griggin, an unhappy expression on his face that rarely showed itself. "I just couldn't do it."

They walked on, boots crunching in the freshly fallen snow.

"He's probably dead now, anyway. There was another one for the exam after me. So what bloody difference does it make? Just cost me my paper. I should have just got on with it. I'm supposed to be a bloody assassin, aren't I? They point me at someone, I kill him. None of this sentimental crap."

"It doesn't make much of a difference to Chok'sul," said Griggin. "But it makes quite a significant difference to you."

"Maybe I'm not cut out to be a Rogue after all," said Nix, "But I love doing it. Passing unseen, picking up things. Nobody knowing I've been there. And I thought that taking out enemies would be just as much fun. But they're not supposed to be *people*."

"You've fought with me back in Gnomeregan, in Marvin's shop, remember?"

"Yeah, but that was different. He was trying to nick our plans, and anyway, I only knocked him out."

"That may be so, but I have no doubt that if your, my or Marvin's life would have been at risk, you would have used deadly force."

"Maybe," said Nix. "But you sent Big Blue in, and they just screamed and bolted."

Griggin sighed. "True. I was the only one with blood on his hands on that occasion. I do regret it, but if they had found you, then I would have attacked without compunction. You simply did not see sufficient need to kill a fellow being. I conclude that you are not a cold-blooded killer. That is not inherently a bad result."

"It is if I want the certificate that says I am, Dad."

"Well, *do* you want the certificate?"

Nix said nothing for a dozen or so footsteps.

"I won't get to do the advanced assassination classes without it."

"How much of a loss is that? There's combat and subtlety, isn't there?"

"I suppose."

Neither of the Gnomes spoke till they walked into the gates of Ironforge. Nix was about to turn right, to their

home, but Griggin pulled him to the left, and the Stonefire Tavern.

"You're still alive, son. That calls for a celebration."

"Acolyte Bezoar, I welcome you to the Circle, and may your mind be steadfast. You will belong to the Circle for all of your days, and the Circle will belong to you."

Griggin looked at the new acolyte, kneeled before Acting Chief Warlock Briarthorn. He looked small, thin, and even from behind Griggin could see he was shaking. Bezoar. An interesting name. Doubtlessly, his parents had given the boy that name hoping he would become a healer. What a pity. Warlocks did have the ability to create stones with healing capabilities, but they were not true healing powers. They tricked the body into believing it was healed, more than anything else. Warlocks were limited to destruction of life, and the best they could hope to achieve was to refrain from doing so as long as they could. An important skill to achieve this was to shut out the voices of Daemons. They had all witnessed Briarthorn's infusion of the essential knowledge into the poor boy, then the expression of relief on his face as the whispers abated,

for the moment. Griggin hadn't the heart to tell young Bezoar that they would start again soon, and have to be stilled, by him, all over again. Warlocks never rest easy. Still, Griggin was satisfied. They'd got to the boy in time. Only just in time, but the difference between life and death is refreshingly clear. The boy would live. Still, Bezoar's mind was far from tranquil, which automatically made him a Hard Case, which automatically meant...

"Warlock Griggin?"

"Yes, Chief Warlock?" Here it comes, thought Griggin.

"I believe that Warlock Bezoar would benefit most from your vast experience in the control of inner Daemons. Will you take on the task of guiding his hands and mind?"

It wasn't really a question. Griggin bowed his head, and raised his hand, palm upward.

"I will, Chief Warlock Briarthorn."

"Then so mote it be. I appoint Warlock Griggin the mentor and guide of Warlock Bezoar, and may he find tranquility."

"Command me, Master."

Griggin looked at the lad. As Warlocks went, he looked the part. Thin, dark hair running down to his shoulders. Wrinkles that a thirty-year-old lad should not have on his face, and a permanent look of anguish.

"Let's have a little less of that, Warlock Bezoar. When was the last time you ate?"

"This morning, Master."

"Well, there's your problem," said Griggin. "Can't control Daemons on an empty stomach. Follow me. I know a place that does an excellent roast boar."

"I... I don't have much money, Master. I cannot afford..."

"I can. My treat. Follow me."

Bezoar followed Griggin into one of the places some way away from where he usually had lunch. Griggin didn't like to mix his normal, more cheerful business with his Circle business. He'd found this place after he'd installed a new water boiler in some Dwarf's home. The food was good, and it was busy. They entered the dining room. Bezoar instinctively headed for a dark corner, but Griggin grabbed his shoulder and led him to a table by the window instead. Bezoar looked like he was afraid he would catch fire from the light, and

hunched over his plate.

"Eat, my lad," said Griggin. "It's a shame to let it go cold."

"Yes, Master."

Griggin started on his own meal. After the first time he had his lunch here, he'd never had anything but the Roast Boar with Token Vegetables. Never change a winning combination. Bezoar seemed reluctant to start, toyed with his food, took a small bite. Griggin paused, put his elbows on the table and looked at Bezoar.

"Look around you. What do you see?"

Bezoar looked up at Griggin. "I don't understand, Master. What do you mean?"

"Would you stop calling me 'Master' at every opportunity? It gives me the dremfels. Now look. What do you see?"

Bezoar looked round him, nervously, as if he were afraid people might notice him, and be offended at his impertinence in sullyng their persons with his gaze.

"I... I see people, Ma--" Bezoar's gaze flitted up to Griggin, then down again. "Sir. People. I must not harm them."

"Then don't. Why do you think you might?"

"They are telling me, Sir. They are telling me to kill them, cleanse Azeroth of their presence. They tell me they are parasites. But they aren't, Sir?"

Griggin sighed and shook his head. "It's the sort of thing Daemons say, Bezoar. I know how persuasive they can be, truly I do. But they are wrong. We belong here. They don't."

"I know that, Sir," said Bezoar. "But I don't *know* it. When they speak, it sounds like Truth. I cannot resist. I cannot disbelieve them."

"Yes you can, Bezoar. You are not a defenceless victim anymore. You are a Warlock, of the Circle. And putting Daemons in the place where they belong is precisely what we do. I will show you how to. This morning, you told the Daemons to be quiet, and they were, were they not? With time, you will be able to summon them, and bind them to do your bidding. You will learn to use their dark powers for your own purposes, and put those powers in the service of the very people they wish to wipe off the face of Azeroth."

Bezoar closed his eyes.

"What if I can't?"

Griggin bent forward, looking into Bezoar's eyes.

"Warlock Bezoar, there is good food on your plate and you have not done it proper justice. It was prepared for you by the Innkeeper's daughter, and she doesn't appreciate her arts being wasted. Now eat. We are not leaving while there is still food on your plate."

Griggin started to dissect his boar ribs, putting the meat in a neat little pile on his plate. Bezoar started on his food.

"But to answer your question," said Griggin, "No Warlock of the Circle will be allowed to harm innocents. That is the purpose of the Circle's existence, the core of our function. All other things are secondary, including our own lives. Do you understand?"

Bezoar looked up at Griggin.

"Yes, Master." He was silent for a few moments.

"Thank you," he said.

"So where by the Titans have *you* been? I was expecting you home for dinner."

"I'm sorry, my love. I've had a new Acolyte assigned to me. It would have been unwise to leave him alone without checking whether he could silence the voices by himself."

"Hmph. I saved you some. It's in the oven."

Griggin grinned, snuck up behind Lenna and wrapped his arms round her.

"I love you. You give me food."

Lenna looked over her shoulder at her husband.

"Men. Really, you're so easy to please."

"Lots of food, and lots of..."

"Ah," said Lenna. "Speaking of which. Trixie."

Griggin frowned, and stepped over to the oven. A blast of warm air and a divine smell welcomed him as he opened the door.

"What's up with Trixie?"

Lenna smiled wryly. "She's not a virgin anymore."

Griggin touched the handle of the pot, gave a small yelp, then stuck his fingers in his mouth and blew on them.

"She's... not? Who..."

"Some boy in her class," said Lenna. "He treated her with less than the desirable amount of respect afterwards."

Griggin stared at Lenna, dinner almost forgotten.

"Is she alright?"

"Coping. Took a bit of a knock to her pride. She'll be fine, or I hope she will be." Lenna shook her head. "Her current class seems to be a complete bunch of losers, though. No company for a Gnomish Warrior Princess."

Griggin picked up a cloth, and took the pot out of the oven. He ladled stew onto his plate, and reached into a cupboard for the hot sauce. Lenna handed him a spoon.

"The number of children in this house is rapidly decreasing," said Griggin.

"Surely, you are not suggesting that we increase it again?"

"No. Nono," said Griggin, then opened his eyes wide. "Trixie! She's not... is she?"

Lenna shrugged. "She didn't say. Too early to tell anyway. I believe precautions were taken."

"Gods be thanked for that, at least. I'm taking her to the doctor as soon as possible."

"No, you won't. I'll take her. Anyway, what about Nix? He failed his exam. He *never* fails exams. What gives?"

"It's a failed exam, but he failed because his compassion got in the way. He may have to drop his Assassination classes if he doesn't find a way of putting

aside his feelings."

Lenna put her arm on the table, rested her chin on her hand. She said nothing for a while, then looked up at Griggin.

"I can live with my baby boy not becoming an assassin."

"They say the combat classes are tougher," said Griggin. "The Subterfuge and Deception classes, he breezes through as if he already knows most of what they're teaching."

Lenna grinned. "No wonder. He's been practicing on *me*. Mr. Nix Steambender will have to get up a lot earlier than he manages now, to get one over on me."

Griggin spooned up the last of his stew, and helped himself to more.

"No fair using the Maternal Tracking Spell."

"All's fair in love and war," said Lenna. "And this is war."

Trixie stood in the middle of the small arena, next to the melon on a pole that was to be her arch-enemy this afternoon. Her two-hander was on her back, and she was holding her helm under her arm. A call went up for

volunteers among the spectators, and several hands went up. Bilban Tosslespanner, Warrior trainer extraordinaire, rubbed his chin, then pointed at one of the Gnomes.

"Mr. Sparkbolt? Front and center if you please."

Trixie couldn't help noticing that a great cloud of amusement descended on the crowd. This was going to be tough. Trixie set her jaw. So it would be tough. She didn't care. That melon was fruit salad. She'd had enough of her class, filled to the brim with the offensively stupid. The next class might be just as stupid, of course, but that was a chance worth taking. She sized up her adversary as he came down the stairs. Gnome. Wielding a mace and a shield. Confident look in his eyes, but didn't they all have that?

They took up positions, and Trixie put on her helm. She took a few experimental swings with her sword, loosening up her muscles. Then, she fixed Mr. Sparkbolt with a stare.

"Good luck," he said. "You'll need it."

At Tosslespanner's signal, Trixie lunged forward with a thrust straight to her opponent's helm. He dodged, knocked her sword out of the way with his shield and counter-attacked with his mace. Trixie still hadn't taken

to using shields, preferring not to be where the blows fell instead. She dodged his attack easily, and sliced low. He jumped back, gave up a few feet of space, then charged forward into Trixie, shield up, swinging his mace. Trixie leapt to one side, changed the grip on her sword and tried to mow his legs from under him. He ducked, and planted his shield in the sand. Trixie's big sword connected with a clang that jarred her arms. His mace was coming straight for her head, and she dropped to the floor, rolling out of the way. She could hear it whistle as it passed by.

They got to their feet, and separated.

"Ready to give up yet?"

Trixie scowled. "In your dreams."

She squared off against him, sword raised, weight balanced between her feet. Quick as water, she leapt to one side, swung her sword round. He turned, moving forward to deflect her blow with his shield, but Trixie had already leapt to her other foot and sliced her sword low at his legs. As he lowered his shield to deflect the blow, Trixie leapt back, flicked her sword around, took it by blade and handle and lunged at him. She caught him across the shoulders and *pushed*. Mr. Sparkbolt performed a most undignified two-buttock landing and

Trixie's sword came round in a faint circle of steel. The top half of the melon slid down slowly, fell down, and landed in the sand. Sticky side down, of course.

Trixie stood still for a moment, catching her breath, then grinned at her opponent behind the visor of her helm. She held a hand out. He took it, and she pulled him to his feet. He pulled off his helm, and nodded at Trixie, grinning back at her.

"That was a dirty trick," he said. "Well done. *Don't* try that next time."

Trixie pulled out her oily rag, and cleaned the vegetable blood off her sword. Then, she sheathed it without looking. She took off her helm and shook out her hair.

"I got plenty of other tricks," she said. "No worries there."

"Good. Welcome to our class."

They were sitting at one of the heavy wooden tables in the Stone Table. Including Trixie, there were five of them. Trixie's opponent of that afternoon introduced her.

"This here is Jonno Fireweaver. His dad's a fire mage, just like mine. The big girl here is Miss Gemma Ironhand, the *small* girl here is Dora Rainfist. Don't let her innocent looks deceive you, she comes from a long line of Warriors. And I am Richard Sparkbolt, at your service."

Trixie's hand disappeared in Gemma's large five-fingered fist.

"I'm pleased to meet ye," she said. "It's about time we got some fresh blood in our wee group."

Jonno nodded. "Yeah. We're getting too used to each other, and we're usually on to each other's tricks before we try them."

Trixie raised her eyebrows.

"You guys only practice amongst yourselves? What about the rest of the class?"

"They haven't a moth's chance in a candleflame of getting near us," said Richard. "It's embarrassing for them, and doesn't teach us anything. I'm almost tempted to go a bit easy on some of them for a while."

Trixie's eyes fixed on Richard's face, with a look that spelt trouble.

"Are you saying you let me win? Just say the word, and I'll ask for a re-trial."

Richard laughed. "Almost tempting. You're *not* getting me with those feints again. But no, it was a fair win for you. And I learnt."

Dora Rainfist, who had been quiet up to now, suddenly leant forward. She looked at Trixie with piercing light blue eyes from under her dark, short hair.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to your last class?"

Trixie sneered. "Already did. Should have done months ago."

"Ah," said Jonno. "The fearless Trogg-hunters, eh?"

"Oh *that* was yer class?" Gemma rumbled. "That bunch of wee jobbies couldnae fight their way out of a paper bag. Well done fer gettin' shot of 'em."

"So," said Trixie. "What's class like here?"

"Get a shield," said Richard. "You're not going to pass without one."

"Hmm. Don't like shields."

"Heh. I wuv my shield," said Jonno. "People think it's just a plank to hide behind, but actually, it's another thing to hit people with."

"I'd rather go for two swords, then."

Richard looked at Trixie, a big grin on his face.

"Go spar with Gemma a few times. She'll change your mind. Anyway, you're prot. You have to know how to use a shield, or what's the point?"

Trixie sniffed. "I wanted to go fury, but Dad won't let me."

"Bunch of over-excited puppies," said Jonno. "It takes skill to get everybody in the room to look at you, and not at the hackers and the sparkies, let alone the healers."

"Gods, yes", said Richard. "Light forbid that anything might happen to the healers. Whenever one of them breaks a fingernail or stubs a toe, they always blame us."

Jonno shook his head. "*Everybody* blames us when they get hit, even if they paint a big target on their chest, and stand in a fire holding a sign saying 'I bonked yer mammie' in Orcish. Oh the joy of being in the protection racket."

"Och well. It ain't all bad." Gemma grinned. "Boys drool over womenfolk in plate armour."

"I had my uncle make me a plate armoured bra and undies," said Dora, with a vague smile on her lips. "I managed to drop a few jaws and turn some heads

wearing them."

"I've never seen those," said Jonno.

Dora put her arms on the table and leaned forward a bit, for the best effect.

"They don't fit me anymore."

Trixie started to laugh, then noticed someone standing behind Gemma and Dora, looking at her with that mocking grin on his face that she'd come to expect from her friends in class.

"Well, if it isn't old Two-and-two. Think you're too good for us now? Do your new friends know the sort of thing you get up to?"

Before Trixie could even open her mouth to say something, Gemma calmly raised her hand, took hold of Trixie's former classmate, spun him round and slammed the back of his head onto the table. She easily held him down with one massively muscled arm.

"I'm thinkin ye want to be tellin' Miss Trixie how sorry ye are for saying that," she said. "If ye need a wee bit of inspiration, I can make ye *feel* sorry. Easy as pie."

Trixie's former classmate looked into Gemma's soft brown eyes, then looked at Trixie.

"We're waiting," said Gemma. "In yer own time. Bones heal. Chicks like scars. Think they're really manly, 'less they're on yer family jewels."

"Sorry," said the lad, in a hurry.

"There. Now isn't that *nice*?"

Gemma let go of the Gnome, and he jumped to his feet, hesitating, not sure what to do.

"Piss off," suggested Richard. The boy thought this was a splendid idea and made himself scarce.

Jonno gave Trixie a strange look. "Why are they calling you Two-and-two? If you don't mind me asking?"

"They're morons," said Trixie.

"That would explain it," said Jonno.

"Look, Mr. Steambender, Orcs don't come with crosses painted on their backs where their kidneys are. You're three inches low. Walk round, re-stealth and try again."

Nix gave a short nod, and did as he was told. He quickly looked round him. The skeletons of the various creatures round him gave him the creeps. Especially the big dragon skull at the end of the hallway. It looked

like in better days, it could have eaten a whole family of Gnomes, and considered that a light snack. Once more, Nix wrapped himself in shadow, and crept up on his pretend victim, blades out. Pretend victims were easier than live Ogres, and not just because they didn't fight back. Nix stabbed at the big straw Orc, and Fenthwick nodded.

"Better. Again. This time put some more force into it. Remember you're trying to keep your target off-balance till he's dead. If you don't, *you* may end up dead. So follow up with a few extra attacks after that. You decide which ones to use."

"Yessir," said Nix.

"And keep your voice down. We're supposed to be stealthy, for the Titan's sake."

Nix and his classmates spent a very instructive hour or so stabbing and slashing first the practice dummies, then each other. With wooden knives, because Unseen-or-heard-of Academy didn't get paid for dead students. Nix was sitting on a bench next to a Human woman, who was pulling up her trouser leg and admiring a few impressive bruises on her long, thin legs.

"Bloody Gnomes," she muttered.

Nix looked ahead of him. This specimen of womanhood had been looking down on him from a height rather greater than her five-foot-six-inches.

"Does that mean you don't think I'm cute anymore?"

"We weren't allowed to fight back, and you know it. I can't believe I went easy on you."

"You did? Could have fooled me."

Fenthwick glared at them. "Is that discussion of interest to the general public, Miss? Sir? No? Then let's have a little less of that. Right. Next round. This time, you *will* resist."

The woman slowly looked down on Nix, with a large, evil grin on her face. She flipped her practice dagger into the air and caught it.

"Finally," she said. "On your feet, shrimp."

Nix looked up at her, eyes large.

"Oh please don't hurt me!"

"Won't hurt you a bit."

"When you get home, put a raw steak on it," said Nix. "Keeps the swelling down. Don't touch it, you'll only make it worse."

"I'll get you for this."

"Get me for what? I didn't decide to kick wide and face-plant on the floor."

The woman gave him a nasty look, found this hurt, and winced.

"Don't *touch* it," said Nix.

"Sod you."

"Thanks for the offer, but that's not my thing."

Trainer Fenthwick walked up to them, and tapped his foot. "Let me explain this again. Stealth. It means doing your thing *without* people being able to see or hear you. Opening your mouth in order to make noise is deleterious to that endeavour. Is that clear?"

"Yes Sir," said the woman.

Nix nodded enthusiastically.

"Good. I suppose that's as good a point to end the lesson as any. Please disperse in an orderly manner, and don't let anyone see you on the way out."

The woman gave Nix a final filthy look and disappeared. Students left and right disappeared into the murk, a few of them taking the dummy with them. Nix dawdled a bit.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Steambender?"

Nix sighed. "Why do they *do* that? Humans, I mean."

Fenthwick laughed quietly. "They're a young race. Not used to seeing anything but other Humans. Miss Raven is not the worst of them."

"She tried to kick me in the butt. Bugger that for a game of soldiers."

"And you educated her on the foolishness of trying the game of Gnome-punting on you. Well done."

"I just don't understand it. I get on fine with Dwarves. Why do they have to make it so difficult?"

"Oh, don't worry too much. I'm sure that if she saw you fight something big and nasty on your own, she'd help you."

"Huh. I'm not so sure."

"Oh come on. When all's said and done, she's Alliance. We're Alliance. You would help *her* wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. But she sure makes it hard to like her. At least the Dwarves are nice enough to let us use the Hall of Explorers to practice in."

Fenthwick gave Nix a somewhat puzzled look.

"Are they? I didn't know that."

Nix looked at Trainer Fenthwick.

"Do you mean they don't *know* we're here?"

"I hope not. They don't like it when people visit here after closing hours."

"But..." Nix took a breath. "What happens if they find us here?"

Fenthwick shrugged. "Don't know. Never happened. Now do you see why we want you to be quiet?"

"Yes Sir," whispered Nix. Fenthwick grinned.

"Get out of here."

Bezoar sat alone, in a space hidden from the Gnomes, the Dwarves, Humans and what have you. A little smile was on his face. The voices were quiet, so wonderfully quiet. He drew a breath, filling his lungs with the air round him, the smells. His gaze slid over the people walking round in the Commons, going about their business, To the bank, to the auction house, on errands that seemed so important to them. What did they know? But the voices were still. The whispers had stopped. Not even the vague feeling of disquiet, the feeling he had first felt when They found him, remained.

"I knew that would shut you up," he said.

File GSB-063: Hope

Nix slunk through the streets of Ironforge, keeping well out of sight of the people. He'd recently come up with a marvellous game, which he called *putpocketing*. From the shop, he'd got a few nuts and bolts and bits of copper wire. He'd twisted the bits of wire round the nuts to make little artefacts. He would then sneak up on people and put the things in their pockets without them noticing. It was a bit of a shame he never got to see their faces as they reached for their keys and found their new gifts. The horn for four o'clock went off. Time to pick up Trix, do the shopping and go home. He trotted to the Military Quarter, and waited for the Warriors-to-be to come out, sitting on one of the rails that kept people from falling into the small lava pond in front. Trixie came out talking to a few classmates. He waved and she came over.

"Hi Bro. Wassup?"

"Shopping. Got a bunch of IGNITE people coming over tonight, so we need some more food."

"Oh *wonderful*. A whole bunch of steampunks discussing the finer points of smelting copper all night. Can I duck out?"

"Ask Dad," said Nix. He looked over Trixie's shoulder. His mouth fell open. Trixie gave him a strange look, and waved her hand in front of his face.

"Nix? Hello?"

"Who... is *she*?"

Trixie looked.

"Oh, that's Gemma. She dual-wields battle-axes. Bloody scary to have a Dwarf barrelling down on you at full speed, but actually it's pretty easy to deflect people when they do that."

"Not her, you cow. *Her!* The one with the short black hair and the..."

Trixie looked again, then chuckled.

"Oh, that's Dora. Hold on." Trixie waved, and called. Dora walked up.

"Yes?"

Nix glared at his sister, then grinned at Dora. Trixie waved her hand between them.

"Meet my brother. Dora, Nix. Nix, Dora."

Dora turned piercing light blue eyes on Nix. Nix felt them burn on the inside of his skull. He had to say something. Anything.

"Hi! You're hot!"

Dora slowly nodded, smiling not even a little bit. Nix slowly wilted on the spot.

"Anything else?" said Dora.

"Nice... swords," said Nix.

"Yes they are," said Dora. She glanced at Trixie, who was biting her lip, her face red. She turned her gaze back to Nix.

"Well, nice to meet you. Got to go."

She gave Trixie a look, turned round and trotted off. Trixie waited till she was out of earshot, then bent over laughing.

"Oh that was smooth, bro.

Nice-pregnant-pause-swords."

"Oh shut up!"

"Well, you're right. She does have a lovely pair of... swords. Girls really do appreciate it when you notice."

"Oh for the Titans' sake, I wasn't even looking at her tits!" He stared in the distance. "Those eyes! Do you know it's pretty rare to have really black hair and such

light blue eyes?"

"Probably dyes it," said Trixie, starting off to the shops. "Got the shopping bag?"

"Yeah got it. I don't think she does, though. And then you go and ruin it for me."

"Ruin it for you? I wasn't the one going on about her lovely ti- swords. Is there any parsnip on the list?"

"I wasn't *ready* yet. Yes there is."

"Can we forget those and get something else instead? I hate parsnips. Not *ready*?"

"Yeah. Hadn't thought of a good starter line yet. You could have waited a bit. Give me a few seconds. Anyway, Mum'll catch on. She knows exactly how much you like parsnips, and they're apparently good for you."

"They're nasty, even if you fry them. Is throwing up good for you? Oh, and let me tell you, girls like pre-recorded pickup lines about as much as I like parsnips."

"Whuh," said Nix. "We could get sweet potatoes. What *do* girls like, then?"

"Oh, I don't know. Be honest. Be interesting."

"Interesting is a curse in some places," said Nix.
"And I was honest. I really do think she's hot."

Trixie said nothing for a while. Dora wasn't ugly or anything, but she'd struck Trixie as being a bit mousey. The kind of girl you wouldn't expect could hit as hard and fast as she could. Reducing boys to dribbling idiots was yet another unexpected talent. In the nicest possible way, Trixie couldn't see what Nix saw in her.

"Oh well. She knows you exist now." Trixie grinned.
"Go easy on her, will you?"

Nix scowled at Little Sister. "Lots of nice soggy parsnips tonight. You can have mine."

"Good morning Warlock Bezoar, and may your mind be steadfast. Were you able to shut out the witterings from the Wild Nethers?"

"Good morning, Sir. Yes, I was. The techniques I have been taught were most effective, and your advice was very useful."

Griggin looked at Bezoar's face. He wasn't smiling, which would have been unnatural, but he looked peaceful at least. The boy might actually have some talent, which would be nice for a change. Griggin had

been given students with barely the minimal ability needed to shield their minds from intrusions. In such cases, Griggin had the Master teach them a few simple Warlock spells, for confidence more than anything else, and left it at that. And then there were the unfortunates who couldn't do even that. Utterly defenceless against the dark influence, they typically went insane within a week of the Daemons becoming aware of them. Griggin had never seen that happen to any of his Acolytes, but he'd seen others. Locked up in one of the dark places of the Warlock Circle, either screaming at the top of their voices, hurling themselves against the walls of their prisons without even noticing their bleeding faces and fingernails, or lying completely still, not daring to speak or do more than shiver, their faces a mask of agony. Fear beyond fear, suffering beyond suffering. There was only one thing the Warlock Circle could do for them, and they felt no shame or remorse in doing it. Death was a mercy to those unhappy souls, and every Warlock hoped that the White Lady who receives all souls would know what to do.

Luckily, Bezoar seemed to be coping. Griggin took him to see Trainer Briarthorn, who taught him the spell to summon his first Daemon, an Imp. They went

outside to a secluded spot in the frozen woods of Dun Morogh, where Griggin drew a circle on the ground with his boot. With a frown of concentration, he instilled it with his energy.

"There. Now step inside, and try to summon your Imp."

Bezoar bowed his head to Griggin, and started his chant. The small form of the Imp appeared briefly, made a rude gesture, and disappeared again. Griggin laughed.

"Well, the summoning part you have right. Now for the binding."

Bezoar nodded, cheeks flushed. He set his jaw and tried again. The Imp made a second appearance.

"Piss off! Do you think I have time to play with you? Try it again, and I'll see you dead!"

The small creature screwed its eyes shut, and tried to disappear. It glared at Bezoar.

"You inbred piss-ant! Let go of me! I'll burn you with fire! I'll drown you in your own tears! I'll..."

"Silence!" Bezoar fixed the Imp with a stare. "You will do what I tell you, or it will not go well with you. Too long have you infested my mind with your inane

chatter, your obscenities and your insults. No more! From this moment on, you will obey my commands. You will obey them fully and accurately, or I will make you jump off high places, so that your bones will break. You are bound to me, from this day on until I release you."

The Imp's voice came in a hiss of pure hatred. "Or until you die, Gnome. Or until you die."

"Dismiss him, Bezoar," said Griggin, quietly.

Bezoar nodded, and looked at his new minion with dark eyes.

"Go."

The Imp cowered down, and faded from view. Griggin put a hand on Bezoar's shoulder.

"That was commendably quick. Well done. let's end the morning with some target practice."

"Yes Master," said Bezoar. "What shall we hunt?"

Griggin shook his head. "Target dummies, Warlock Bezoar. We do not harm living creatures if we can help it."

"But surely, Master, we can hunt boar, deer, or other such creatures?"

"We can," said Griggin. "But Demonic energy taints the meat, and we would end up spoiling it. Also, I think I asked you not to call me 'Master' all the time. You are my student, not my minion. 'Sir', or 'Warlock Griggin' will do."

Bezoar bowed his head. "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Let's go. I think we'll use the dummies by the military ward. Staying in dark places is not good for you."

"Yes Sir."

"Lady and Gentlemen, we have a problem. It seems that the increase in efficiency from scaling up is not as great as we first thought it would be. We are experiencing loss of pressure somewhere in the lower regions."

Anton was pacing to and fro in Griggin's small living room. It was early in the evening, and Lenna was sitting a way off with Bieslook in her lap, quietly reading her a story from a large book. Nix was sitting in his usual spot by the window, back against the wall, bootless feet on the bench, looking outside. Beatrice sat in front of him, elbows on the table, head resting on her hands, eyes

closed. Griggin was busy making everybody more coffee. Chint Waterspray looked up at Anton.

"Gee, are we? I did warn about that, didn't I?"

Beatrice didn't even open her eyes.

"Yes, you did, darling. And since you didn't go so far as to come up with a solution at the time, we thought we'd try anyway."

"It would be nice if people listened to a damn thing I say now and then."

Griggin put down the jug of fresh, strong coffee and looked at his fellow Gnomes.

"Since we are all going to be in deep trouble if the pumps don't perform as expected, it does not matter who was right or wrong. We need to think about the solution, not about whose fault it was."

"Great," said Anton. "And what would that solution be, then?"

Chint leaned back in Griggin's chair, and spread his arms wide.

"Pipes! We drop two big fat copper pipes down there and fill up the hole with cement. U-bend at the end, or if we want to get fancy, we put a spiral there to catch more heat. That way, the stone can be as porous as a

sugar cube, and still, we get our steam."

"Do you have any idea how much that is going to affect our budget? We're talking about two-hundred yards of copper pipe there, and the trouble of actually sticking it down there. Speaking of pipes, I could use one." Anton searched his inside pocket for his tobacco pouch and started to fill up. Griggin gave him a look.

"Not in the house, please. I'm afraid tobacco smoke is not good for young children."

"Fine. I'll step outside for a bit. Fresh air will do me good."

Chint got up. "I need a biological break. Where's the..."

Griggin pointed.

"Thanks," said Chint, and disappeared. Anton walked outside. Griggin closed his eyes a moment, shook his head and followed him, leaving only Beatrice and Nix sitting at the table. Nix turned his eyes back inside, saw everybody had left, and heaved a great sigh.

"Mrs. Glowpipe?"

"Mm?"

"How do you get a girl to like you?"

Beatrice slowly looked round to Nix.

"Get her drunk, have your way with her and leave without telling her your name. It makes her feel like crap, but in the long run, it's less painful, believe me."

Lenna closed the book. Bieslook's small body fit just right in the crook of her arm. She was looking at nothing in particular, with a serious look in her blue-green eyes.

"How did they get her out of the belly of the wolf?"

"They cut open its belly, and got her out. And her grandmother, too."

"But a wolf tears you to bits and chews you up. How did they put her together again?"

"Well, the wolf swallowed her whole. So they just pulled her out again."

"But a wolf *can't* swallow you whole! You don't fit down its throat."

"It was a very large wolf. A Worg could do it. Or a corehound. A corehound could swallow her *and* her grandmother. At the same time."

"And then they put stones in its belly, and sewed it up?"

"Yes."

"But didn't that *hurt*?"

"It was asleep, dear."

"Trixie stepped on my hand. I woke up."

"Perhaps a Worg is so tough it doesn't notice."

"But then the wolf tried to have a drink and it fell into the water and drowned."

"Well, it was a *bad* wolf."

"Why?"

"It ate a young girl and her grandmother!"

"Why didn't she see it wasn't her Grandmother?"

That's stupid."

"The wolf was under the covers, wearing Granny's bonnet."

"But it was a *big* wolf. Didn't its tail stick out?"

Lenna looked at the small girl. Time for that old stand-by.

"Perhaps this was a magic wolf that had a Granny form. I can make people look like sheep, remember? Maybe this wolf could turn itself into a Granny."

Bieslook nodded slowly.

"I still think they're mean to the wolf."

"I suppose they were. Time for bed."

"Hiya!"

Dora Rainfist looked over her shoulder at Nix, and made a small noise acknowledging his presence. Nix gave her what he hoped was a winning, friendly and not in any way offensive smile. Dora walked on, in the general direction of one of the armour shops near the bank. It just so happened that was also near where Nix lived, who'd have thought that?

"Where're you off to?"

"To buy things to hit people with." Dora looked round at Nix. "Wanna come with?"

"Sure!"

Dora looked at the cave roof, far, far up, and sighed. Luckily, Nix was radiating enough enthusiasm for the both of them.

"What are you going for?"

"Two-handed mace."

"Cool."

"They're lame. A spiky ball on a stick, and you can't use a shield while you're using them. But we have to pick up and use any weapon we find."

"Can you use a dagger?"

"Who'd want to use one of *those*?"

Nix produced his new dagger. It was about six inches long, and made from blackened steel so he didn't have to use a candle to stop it shining. A tiny sliver of bright shine ran down its edge. Nix pulled up his sleeve and shaved some hairs off his arm.

"It's *tiny*," said Dora.

"I'm compensating," said Nix, with a grin.

"I'm sure you are."

"Hey, after you make your purchases, wanna come with me? I know all the nice places here. I could buy you a drink."

"Buy me a drink," said Dora.

"Yeah," said Nix.

"An *alcoholic* drink?"

"Sure, if you like."

"Engage in some diminutive conversation?"

"Yeah."

"Establish a rapport?"

"Yes!"

"And walk me home afterwards?"

Nix looked at the few tiny freckles on Dora's face. She had pale skin, probably had to be careful if she got out in the sun for too long. Her eyes were definitely

blue, though, and not grey. Nix wished he could paint, or draw things besides schematics.

"Um... yes, sure."

"And come up for another drink?"

"Sure, why not?" Nix hardly dared to breathe. Surely, it couldn't be *this* easy?

"Get your hand inside my blouse?"

"Sure." Nix' eyes grew large. "No! Nono!"

They arrived at the armory shop. Dora turned her stare on Nix.

"No thank you. Goodbye."

She turned round, and walked into the shop. Nix decided trying to follow her there would be counter-productive. He stared at the shop door for a few moments.

"That was a stupid, nasty trick."

He said nothing for a while, lost in thought.

"Ye gods, she's gorgeous."

Nix shook his head, and walked home.

"Ahh, Warlock Griggin. How go things with your new acolyte?"

"Better than I expected, Chief. He performed his first summoning this afternoon. It took him only two tries. Very impressive."

"Excellent! Another capable Warlock in the Circle will not come amiss. The authorities may not like us much, but they do appreciate our firepower."

Griggin waved a hand. "I wouldn't expect much of young Bezoar yet, Sir. I had not expected him to do so well. I have had a few students who were left alone for a while by the Daemons to lull them into a false sense of security. In fact, that is also what happened to me when I was a student. I'm expecting setbacks, and I hope I'll be quick enough to catch them."

Acting Warlock Chief Briarthorn laughed.

"You're always the pessimist, Griggin. I suspect you do that so that you'll only ever be pleasantly surprised."

"In my experience, Sir, there is no such thing as a pleasant surprise."

"Well, in that case, keep your eyes open, but don't worry too much. I have a good feeling about Warlock Bezoar. His close shave with Daemon possession will have taught him to be careful, steady and unwavering. I see this often. The hardest cases turn out to be the most worthwhile Warlocks."

"Hmm. Tomorrow, I will make him put his minion through its paces. Let's see how well he does when fatigue sets in. The fields outside Gnomeregan should offer a target-rich environment."

"Excellent. Well, I must leave you. Keep me informed."

"I will, Sir."

Trixie stepped out of the changing room, bag of metal gear in her hand. As she turned round to leave, she spotted Richard coming out of the boys' changing room, making for the gates. She waited a bit and fell in step with him. He was rubbing his neck.

"Hiya," said Trixie. "Hard practice?"

Richard pulled a face. "Stumbled over my own feet and fell over. Silly git."

Trixie nodded. "The floor is a much-underestimated opponent. I daresay floors are responsible for over forty percent of injuries."

Richard laughed. "We should ban them. No more floors! Free fall for everybody!"

They grinned at each other, then fell silent as they walked on. They came to the fire pool. Usually, this was

where Richard went straight on in the direction of the Mystic Ward, and Trixie turned left. Today, though, Richard turned left with her.

"Not going home?" asked Trixie.

"Going to the Stone Table to grab a bite to eat. Dad's off with his Mage friends. Very important meeting on Mage stuff." Richard grinned. "They must have very in-depth discussions about the fabric of the Universe. Usually doesn't come home before midnight."

"Ah," said Trixie. "My dad has meetings like that. Staggers in at an ungodly hour reeking of strong coffee."

"Your dad doesn't drink?"

"Meh, the odd pint or so, but I've never seen him drunk. Says he likes to keep his faculties about him."

They walked on. Trixie glanced at Richard's face. The idea had come to her the moment Richard mentioned food. The debate on whether or not to act on it took only a bit longer.

"Hey."

Richard looked round. "Yes?"

"I'm sure if I ask, you can have dinner with us. Not sure what we're having, but I think it's better than the

fried rat they serve to the students in the Mensa Silex."

"You sure your mum won't mind?" said Richard, after a small pause.

"Worst she can do is throw you out," said Trixie. "We have a rule against fireballs in the house."

Griggin walked in the door to find a strange boy sitting at his table. He glanced over to the kitchen, where Lenna was stirring one of the pans. She gave him a little grin and a shrug. The boy got to his feet.

"Good evening, Sir. Richard Sparkbolt at your service." He held out his hand.

"Griggin Steambender, at yours," said Griggin, shaking it.

Trixie looked at her father. "He's in my class. I asked if he could stay for dinner."

Lenna walked up, wiping her hands on a towel. "And how could I refuse?"

Griggin put an arm round Lenna's shoulder. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"This isn't the one who..."

Lenna shook her head, smiling. "No. He looks like a nice boy."

"Hm good." Griggin turned to Richard. "Welcome. We're just waiting for Nix, and then we can eat. Sparkbolt..." Griggin thought a moment. "Are you by any chance related to Grand Master Engineer Mericet Sparkbolt?"

"He's my uncle, Sir, on my Father's side."

"Ah. Well, he passed me for my Master Engineering."

"I understand that's no mean feat, Sir," said Richard.

"He refers to it as torturing students."

"Does he now? That explains a lot."

The door opened and Nix walked in. He threw his jacket in the general direction of the pegs by the door, saw Richard, and stopped.

"Oh hi. Who're you?"

Trixie sniffed. "Richard? This is my brother, Nix. Nix? This is Richard. He's in my class." A slight edge crept into Trixie's voice. "He specialises in swords."

Richard held out his hand to Nix, who shook it.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," said Nix. He looked at his mother.

"What's for dinner?"

"Fantasy Stew if you're not careful," said Lenna. "Set the table, will you?"

Richard jumped to his feet. "I'll help."

Nix and Richard started on the table. Lenna looked at Griggin, eyes wide, mouth open, and pointed. Griggin laughed quietly and shook his head. The table was set with exemplary efficiency and they sat down. Lenna had enlarged the stew by adding more potatoes and carrots. With satisfaction, she noted that there was just a little bit left when nobody wanted any more. Bieslook sat back in her chair, and patted her stomach.

"I'm all filled up," she said.

"Oh? No cake for you, then?"

Bieslook's eyes gleamed. "Yes please!"

"Ah," said Richard. "The Second Stomach."

"What?"

Richard bent over to Bieslook. "It's a special stomach, for when you have eaten all you can, and someone offers you pudding."

"Oh," said Bieslook. "Cows have *four* stomachs. They barf up their food and chew it again, and then they swallow it back down."

Nix grinned. "If you were hoping to put me off my dessert, fat chance."

Dessert was dealt with to the last crumb. Griggin walked to the cupboard, and pulled out their old board game. He put it on the table, looking at Richard.

"Would you like to join us for a game?"

Richard pointed. "Hey! That's a classic board. It's got White City on. Those things are rare."

Griggin laughed. "Ah. So you're a player too? Good. Saves us having to explain the rules."

"I know Stovold's Guide almost by heart," said Richard. "I read it front to back and back to front for months. I was hoping to catch my mother out. Not a chance."

"You have a copy of Stovold's? That's lucky. It's been out of print for ages, and people ask ridiculous amounts for second-hand ones."

"Well, we had it back in Gnomeregan. It's probably glowing green now. We had to leave in a hurry."

"That's a shame. But if your mother is such a good player, perhaps we should invite her and your father over for a few games."

"I'm sure my father would be delighted, Sir. My mother... remained in Gnomeregan."

Griggin closed his eyes a moment. "My apologies, Richard. I'm sorry for your loss."

"You weren't to know, sir," said Richard.

Lenna handed Richard the dice.

"You start. Escalators are up, stations are green, and three buskers per station."

Lenna was putting Bieslook to bed. It was long, long past her bedtime. Trixie was letting Richard out and the house was winding down. Bieslook blinked slowly.

"Is Richard going to live with us too? He can sleep in Trixie's bed, that's big enough. Nix has too much stuff."

Lenna laughed. "I don't think so, Bies. He lives with his own father. You like him, then?"

"Trixie smiles with her eyes when she looks at him."

"Hm. I noticed. And he helped washing up. He may be around the place more."

"Need more chocolate and biscuits," said Bieslook.

"Oh? Like them, do you?"

Bieslook turned over, settling down.

"For Trixie," she said.

File GSB-065: Counsel.

The library in the Hall of Explorers was large, and full of books. Lenna smiled at herself. Well of course it would be, but she loved the shelves upon shelves of carefully penned works of knowledge, neatly ordered thematically by numbers. A Dwarf named Dewey had neatly ordered the whole of Knowledge itself, which was one of those things you would never think of doing unless you had to find back a specific book from a pile of thousands upon thousands. To do it, though, Mr. Dewey had needed to invent a new number for Literature, and one for History, Geography and Biology. For some reason, though, he'd never seen fit to include a category for spellbooks. Perhaps spells refused to be classified. She'd just dropped Bieslook off in Mr. Munninn Magellas' group. He'd be telling the children all about the history of the Titans. Knowing Bieslook, she'd take it up like a sponge, especially the gory bits. Right. Home to change, then up to the Mystic Ward for some target practice. Lenna walked to the bridge over the lake of molten rock. From a professional standpoint,

the lake was a magnificent feat of magecraft. Transport of heat from where you didn't want it to somewhere it would do some good. Lenna grinned. Griggin had asked whether it would be possible to let out a bit of heat to boil water. Um... no dear. You don't poke holes in something that keeps the entire city from going up in smoke. So now they were drilling down to the magma stream that fed the lake. Lenna hoped they knew what they were doing. Griggin usually did. When he didn't, she was there to help him. Lenna looked up at one of the large cauldrons as it poured lava into the smelting furnace. Of course, it worked the other way round as well, oh yes. Without Griggin Brassmelter, Lenna Greenhollow might never have lived to give birth to two wonderful... well, tolerably nice children.

Back in the day, when she first found out that she could see and direct the flow of energy with her mind, and do it quite well if she said so herself, it had been one endless stream of fun. Her classmates were a riot. Her parents had sent her to a girls-only school for mages, and Lenna had divided her remarkable talents between advancing her skills as a fire mage and breaking the rules in as ingenious a way as possible. One of the biggest rules, of course, was No Boys

Allowed. Honestly, why did they bother drawing up a rule like that? They knew full well it'd be broken before the ink was dry. And break it, they did. As often and as spectacularly as they could. It had become a bit of a competition between Lenna and her closest friend. Well, she'd won. Ginger had been expelled. Lenna had only been suspended. She'd been lucky there.

Lenna opened the front door, walked in. She got out of her practical green dress and dressed herself in trousers, a loose-fitting white blouse, and robes. Today was going to be full-out high powered barrages, so she armoured herself to the teeth. Tough felt shoulder pieces, bracers, gloves, belt, boots. Each of these items had been enchanted to increase her spell power and her reserves of magical energy. Also, the pieces were designed to reinforce each other, so that the result was more than the sum of the individual parts. Lenna picked up her staff and took a deep breath. Magic flowed through her. Raw power, hers to command with the merest move of her fingers. She didn't usually go round dressed like this, because the temptation to shoot fireballs at random objects would be overwhelming. With shining eyes, she held her staff aloft, her other hand forward.

"Enemies, beware! The Gnomes are upon you!"

Lenna walked home from the Mystic Ward, by way of the Great Forge, grinning from ear to ear. There was something deeply satisfying in letting rip full-force. It was shorter simply to walk South from the Mystic Ward, but that particular way contained almost all the taverns and bars in the city, which was why some Gnomes referred to it as Death Valley. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil, for I shall be completely smashed. Not that Lenna was in any danger of falling off the wagon. Never again. Her smile faded. It wasn't as though she'd been short of warnings. Like the first time she'd met Griggin. She'd found herself out of school, out of bounds, out of party cheer, head spinning from the booze. Griggin had picked her up, taken her home, to his place. That was usually the way she preferred it as the dorms were clearly unsuitable for the kind of action she was after. And much to her surprise, he hadn't tried anything with her. Lenna chuckled to herself. At the time, she'd thought that Griggin was one of those rare Gnomes who, as the saying goes, lay with a man as one lies with a woman. After all, he had *her*, in his bed,

and did *nothing*! What else could it be? Well, he'd taken about ten minutes to explain that to her. What it boiled down to was that she was drunk, he had better taste than near-necrophiles, he did not have to rely on incapacitating his conquests with drink, he *did* fancy girls thankyouverymuch, and her offer of becoming her Platonic friend to soothe her tormented soul, he politely, yet loudly, declined. Nevertheless, if at any point, she would wish to jump on his bones, he would take the offer under careful consideration. If not, then bugger off. Lenna had screamed at him, she didn't remember what, turned round and stormed out of the house vowing never to lay eyes on this little geek ever again.

And then, of course, the time had come when she finally got herself in over her head, and couldn't threaten or charm her way out. Among the most virile, attractive Gnomes were the Gnomeregan Guards. They had hard muscles in all the right places, moved like they owned the city, in their gleaming armour, and they were always looking, looking for, oh, a beautiful light-brown-haired Mage girl in her early twenties. A girl who knew *exactly* how to impress these fine figures of Gnomehood. By downing a whole bottle of wine in one

go. She could even do it twice. That, lucky girl that she was, had qualified her for a whole evening in the company of Gnomeregan's finest. She thankfully remembered very little of the whole experience, too far gone to notice anything. She regained consciousness in the guard's shower room, cold water sloshing over her, clothes nowhere to be seen. Left on her own, in a pool of her own vomit. A nearby cupboard yielded a towel, which she dried herself with, with arms made of rubber, then wrapped round herself. She staggered out of the guard house, either unseen or ignored, and tried to find her way home, somewhere in the haze surrounding her head. A haze that became more dense, not less, with every uncertain step. She grabbed hold of something solid, the railing of a bridge, a lamppost, something cold and metallic. Lenna Greenhollow realised that she was rapidly getting worse and worse. Her teeth started to chatter, and suddenly she was afraid she might die here, be found naked lying in the gutter the next morning. This wasn't *happening!* Not to *her!* She always came out alright. Whimpering, she tried to make her legs move forward, and found she couldn't. She fell, and her arms weren't strong enough anymore to hold on to... whatever it was.

She heard, more than felt her head hit the hard cobblestones, and darkness closed in.

How long she had lain there, unconscious, she didn't know, but she felt something warm and soft touching her, and there was a vague noise from a long way away, which only later she realised was someone calling her name. Someone pulled her mouth open and stuck a finger down her throat. Lenna tried to pull away, but couldn't. She threw up, tasted the foul acid taste in her mouth, felt the rough feeling on the inside of her teeth, and was vaguely aware of someone holding her head away. For a completely pointless few seconds, full sight, and sound, and pain, returned.

"Oh no, Lenna. What have you done?"

"So... Stupid."

Lenna passed out again.

Even now, two children and forty years later, Lenna could still feel the ice cold fear she had felt that night, feeling her life draining away, into the ground, cold, cold. Griggin had saved her life that night, keeping her warm and carrying her to help. She still felt cold when she woke up in the school's infirmary, nauseous, shivering. The school nurse looked up from where she

was sitting, put her book down and walked to Lenna's bed.

"How do you feel?"

Lenna looked up at the nurse's friendly face, soother of hurts, comforter of small children, the final answer to the bumps and bruises that were part of life for young girls. As long as the nurse was here, life couldn't touch Lenna. Life couldn't drop the enormous pile of trouble on her that she was due.

"All right," said Lenna. "Just a bit upset in the stomach."

"Can I get you something? Something to drink?"

"No thank you."

"Apple juice?"

Lenna closed her eyes for a moment.

"My head hurts."

"I can make you some willow bark tea. Unless it's really bad; then I can call the Priest if you want."

"Tea's fine, thank you."

"Good. I'll make you some, and then you must go back to sleep. You need plenty of rest after what happened to you."

Lenna closed her eyes, wanted to disappear. The nurse's hand was cool on her forehead.

"At least they got the Gnome who did this to you. He won't bother you, or anyone ever again. Now sleep, my child."

Lenna took a deep breath, settled back into the pillows. Only then did she realise what the nurse had said. Her eyes opened wide.

"*What?!*"

A brief flash of pain passed over the nurse's face. She shouldn't have talked about that.

"Don't worry, dear. Go to sleep. That's for the guards to deal with. You just think of getting better."

Lenna sat up, breathing fast, looking at Nurse with panic in her eyes.

"Did they arrest someone for this? Who?"

The nurse put her hand on Lenna's shoulder, pushing her back down onto the bed.

"Some Gnome. He tried to get away after he dropped you on our doorstep, but the guard wouldn't let him. They arrested him. He won't get away with it."

"They arrested *Griggin*?"

"I don't know his name, my child. But it's all going to be alright. Don't you worry."

"He didn't *do* it! He found me by the roadside! He's not the one you want!"

"Oh calm *down*, child. You're not helping anyone by getting all excited."

Lenna's eyes bored into the nurse's. Her voice was deadly calm.

"Where. Is. Griggin."

"In the guard house, dear. There's nothing to worry about."

"Like the rampaging Titans there isn't!"

"Miss Greenhollow! You're not allowed out of bed yet!"

Lenna looked into the eyes of the guard at the desk. The guard looked back at her, with the unhelpful air affected by all civil servants who want you to go forth and multiply.

"Griggin Brassmelter. Let him out."

"Can't do that, Miss. Pending investigations. Can't let him out when investigations are still pending."

"What by the Titans is there to investigate? He brought me home, like you sods should have done."

The guard gave a small, not really amused laugh, as though Lenna had just told a joke that used to be funny when it was new.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Miss. Presumably the alcohol is making your mind play tricks on you."

"Damn you. You know full well that he didn't do anything to me."

"Sorry, Miss. Can't talk about Pending Investigations. It's against the rules."

Lenna had to stop her hands from glowing.

"You know, and I know, first-hand, that the Gnome you have in the cells has nothing to do with what happened to me. Do you think I'm just going to stand by and let you chuck him in jail for the rest of his life?"

The guard narrowed his eyes. He looked round to see if anyone could hear him, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Look, you little slut. You didn't look like you were sorry to be where you were. And if we're forced to come out with all this, you can be sure that they'll throw

you out of that nice clean school of yours. So why don't you keep your pretty little mouth shut and let the grown-ups handle this?"

Lenna didn't even blink.

"I remember you. You are the guy with the battle scar where it doesn't show. I remember it because you shoved it in my *face*. I think I can produce a pretty accurate drawing, in fact. On one of those anatomically correct dolls that you bastards use for the purpose." Lenna bent forward a bit. "Do you fancy dropping your trousers in front of a magistrate?"

"That'll still get you expelled, bitch."

"I'll survive. It'll get you fired. What are the job prospects for an ex-guard thrown out because he couldn't keep his hands off the local wildlife?"

The guard looked into Lenna's eyes, and saw nothing but fierce determination. He swore silently. How old *was* this little bitch anyway?

"Let him out," said Lenna.

Griggin came walking out of the guard house, looking tired, but unhurt. He saw her at the same time she saw him. Lenna's eyes filled with tears. Her first impulse

was to wrap her arms round him and pull him close, but given what had happened, it didn't feel right. They ended up standing in front of each other, simply looking at each other for a long moment.

"Let's go," said Lenna.

They walked off, not really knowing or caring where to, but away from the guard house. Lenna felt that her feet were leading her to the place where she normally went if she wanted to be alone, up the ramps, up the stairways. Griggin looked up at the massive crane, but said nothing. Lenna pulled at the old, rusty padlock that no longer worked, and opened the door to the control room. The place where she usually sat down was only large enough for one, so she moved up a bit. Griggin looked at the large hook that hung from the chains, then at the hatch, which was closed today. He closed his eyes, and sat down next to Lenna, his shoulder not quite touching hers.

Lenna looked at Griggin's face. His eyes were closed. He wasn't smiling. There were a few wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, and in the corners of his eyes, but he couldn't be older than, what, thirty? He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Thank you for getting me out," he said.

Lenna shook her head. "No. Thank *you*. Whatever happens, I'll never be able to thank you enough."

There was a faint look of irony on Griggin's tired face. "There is no need for that. I feel it would be in rather bad taste to demand that of you."

"Oh, but I wasn't..." Lenna fell silent. She *would* do anything for him, including... that. She'd happily leapt into the arms of other Gnomes for far, far less. It seemed... cheap somehow. Not enough.

"I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me."

Lenna looked into his eyes. Griggin was one of those figures in the background that you don't have any immediate use for. You didn't think of them as, well, people. Relevant people. That's it, they were the irrelevant people. She had seen him look at her now and then, but thought nothing of it. More interesting people to think of. But now, he had just become the most relevant Gnome in the city. Would she have done the same for him that he'd done for her? She didn't answer that question. She didn't dare. A sudden desire came on her to touch his face, but she didn't. Lenna thought back on the last time she'd seen him here. He had scared her then, but not in the sense that he might hurt her.

"When we were last here, what were you doing? Really?"

Griggin bowed his head, closed his eyes. Lenna could see the struggle in the way he held himself. Then, he looked up at her, decision made, eyes steady.

"I was going to throw myself down that hatch," he said.

Lenna breathed in slowly, staring. Why?

"Because I am a Warlock," said Griggin. "Every hour of the day or night, the creatures that live in the Twisting Nethers are assaulting my mind. They want to possess me, control me."

"Daemons?"

"Yes, Daemons. Sayaad, Ered'ruin, creatures from the Void. I was born with the... gift that lets me speak with them. Their voices, they are never still. They do not sleep, they do not relent. It is my fear that one day, they will have me, to the ruin of all round me. I wanted to prevent that from happening."

"Did you... not do it, because I was there?"

"Yes."

"Are you suffering now, because I kept you from, uh, jumping?"

Griggin smiled, and shook his head. "My teacher taught me how to deal with the voices in my head. I can do it in my sleep now. Back then, I couldn't. In my sleep. And I was afraid."

Lenna felt a chill run up her spine. Griggin looked back at the hatch.

"If you hadn't been here, that day, then I would be dead now."

Lenna reached out, and put a hand on Griggin's cheek.

"If you hadn't been there yesterday, then I would be dead now."

Griggin put his hand on Lenna's wrist, said nothing. Lenna's eyes filled with tears. There was nothing that she could give to this Gnome, nothing that would be enough. The possibility that *he* might be feeling the same way about *her* hadn't even occurred to her.

Lenna took a breath. And then, as though someone lit a candle in a dark cavern, the darkness was lifted from her mind.

"Can I kiss you now? I really feel that I should."

"No," said Griggin, with the tiniest glint in his eyes. "That sort of thing only leads to goings-on, and I don't think the situation calls for that."

"Tough luck," said Lenna, and kissed Griggin anyway.

There was a winding road that led from the valleys of Dun Morogh to the gates of Ironforge, for uncountable years part of Ironforge's defences. At its very top, would-be attackers were greeted by a huge statue of a Dwarf, hammer and axe raised above his bearded head, defying any who meant to harm this city, to come and have a go if they thought they were hard enough. Nix was sitting on one of the shoulders of this statue, peering out over the road.

"Three Dwarves, swift rams. Wearing Ironforge tabards."

Nix' classmate looked up, and added a few ticks to her notebook. For some reason, cruel Fate, or in this case Trainer Fenthwick, had chosen to re-unite Nix with the woman named Raven who'd tried to punt him, in the library, with the leather boot. She had made herself comfortable lying on Old Beardy's outstretched arm, cloak rolled up under her head. Because she knew full well that her paltry Human capabilities were no match for Nix' far superior Gnomish eyesight, she had closed her eyes in shame, willingly relegating herself to the

menial task of administration. Her hand, with the pencil in it, lay on her knee. Her other hand was under her head. Her face betrayed quiet, simple contentment with her place in the order of things.

"Incoming Griffin. Human woman, guild tabard sable, Human skull and crossbones argent. Two pallets argent, sinister and dexter."

Raven looked up, disturbed at this sudden influx of information.

"Sable is blue, right?"

"Black."

"And what's a pallet when it's at home?"

"Vertical thin line."

Raven scribbled on her pad.

"Black tabard, white skull, vertical lines... How can a *line* be sinister?"

"Means left. Dexter is right. Only it's left for the wearer, not the viewer."

Raven turned over her pad so Nix could see it.

"This about right?"

"Yeah."

"Bloody heralds. Why don't they use normal words like everyone else?"

"Mmm," said Nix, as the griffin passed over their heads. Fenthwick had assigned them an observation task, but his mind wasn't really on it. He wasn't sure whether the last Gnomes had been riding the last model Mechanostrider with the turbine enhancers and catalytic converters, or whether they were the Old Smokies, which were fast, but burnt fuel at a massive rate. It still nagged at him. Not as much as other things, though. He turned his head to Raven. Hmm.

"Hey. You're a girl, right?"

Raven looked up, eyebrows raised. She pulled out the collar of her red-and-black checkered lumberjack's shirt, and peered down.

"Yep," she said.

"And you've had boyfriends."

"So many that I have given up counting," said Raven, with a vague smile.

"Great. So... What did they have to do to, um, get you to, er, you know..."

Raven's calm grey eyes turned to Nix with quiet, amused deliberation.

"My little Gnomish friend, are you trying it on with me?"

"Not *you*. There's this girl in my sister's warrior class."

"Oh, *warrior* girls. That's simple. They won't *be* with a man unless he defeats her in fair and open combat. So what you do is walk up to her, punch her in the face and tell her she's your bitch now. Gets painful if you lose, of course, but if you win... Ooo baby! They're honour-bound to do anything you ask of them...."

Raven gave Nix a smouldering look. "Anything," she breathed.

"Very funny," said Nix. "I'm serious. I really don't know what to do. All she does when I try to talk to her is point sharp things at me."

"What, like swords?"

"Like the *look* in her eyes. So how do I get her to, well..."

"Take her clothes off?"

"Oh come on! I'll settle for her giving me the time of day for now."

Raven thought about it. Her most memorable boyfriend had been her partner in Eastvale logging camp. Eastvale was rightly proud of its stables, and they had thought of acquiring a few of its finest horses without bothering anyone with the palaver of

administration, transfer of ownership papers, handing over gold, and all those things that make commerce such a bore. Being young then, naive in the ways of stealth and subterfuge, they had been spotted. Now the Eastvale people were a friendly lot, who did not send people to the gallows. Not if they could simply bludgeon them to death with stout sticks. Raven and her partner had run for their lives, hiding with beating hearts as riders thundered past looking for them, slowly making their way to the relative safety of Redridge. They had watched from a hiding place on one of the sandstone hills, as the Eastvale riders gave up and turned back. Raven's friend had grinned at her, and the sheer joy at still being alive had provided all the excuse they needed. A dream-like expression was in Raven's eyes. The nice boy had even been so courteous as to let her go on top, while he lay back on the hard rocks.

Nix snapped his fingers. "Oi. Azeroth here."

"I don't think I'm the girl to ask, really," said Raven. "Why don't you find something she likes doing, and develop an interest in that?"

Nix nodded. He could have come up with that himself. Go not to the Humans for counsel, for they will say... well, nothing useful.

"Thanks. Three Humans, on horseback. Eastvale palominos."

Raven's head snapped round.

"Those are not from Eastvale. Trust me. I know."

"Hello? You're... Genna, aren't you?"

The giant woman turned round to Nix, putting down her pen.

"Gemma, lad. Easy mistake to make. What can I do for ye?"

"Well, um... I'm Nix. Trixie's brother. You know Trixie, right?"

Gemma laughed. "Should do, she caught me a right ding on the midsection this morning. Should know better than ta try and be quicker'n you little buggers. I'll get 'er tomorrow."

"Yeah. Well, there's this *other* girl."

"I see. Ye got yer eyes on young Dora, have ye?"

"You *know*?"

"Gods, yes. She's been moanin' about it to us. Mind you," Gemma grinned at Nix. "She's been moaning 'bout it a hell of a lot. Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Nix frowned. "Doesn't the 'methinks' come at the end? And anyway, 'protest' didn't mean back then what it means now."

"Och well spotted, young man."

"They're bludgeoning us to death with Spearshaker in Literature. Like he was the only Dwarf who could hold a pen back in the day. Anyway, yeah. Dora. I want to know if there's something she really likes doing."

"So you can do it with her?"

"Yeah." Nix looked at Gemma's face. "In the sense of 'doing that thing she likes with her', not do 'it' with her."

Gemma's face was completely serious. "Aye. That comes later."

Nix gave Gemma a sad look.

"Please? What does she like doing?"

Gemma chuckled, thought a while.

"Fighting," she said. "Though I think that's not the sort o' thing you're after. Let me see... Ah. She does have a liking for the fine floors in the valley."

"Floors," said Nix, blankly.

"Aye, floors! Peacebloom, Kingsfoil, Bluebells. Floors. She's a fine herbalist, is our Dora."

"Ah, *flowers*. Right." Nix thought a bit, then slowly started to smile. "Well, if it's floors she likes, floors she shall have. Thanks a lot, Gemma."

"That's the spirit, lad."

Lenna sat down with her back to the lava. She had about an hour of freedom left, before Bieslook would be back from class. Make the most of it. She went over the magic spells in her head. Some of these spells did little damage in and of themselves, but opened up the pathways for the more potent spells to follow. The heavy blasts would come to her only with preparation. She opened her eyes, watching the Dwarves at work. Lenna loved work. She could watch it for hours on end. At the other end of the bridge, she saw a Gnome woman, walking in the direction of the great anvil in the middle of the bridge. She had pulled her hood over her face, but still, Lenna thought she could recognise her... Beatrice! Lenna sighed. The woman had tried it on with her husband. She should feel angry about that, but looking at her, she couldn't. The woman was in pain. Not in possession of all her faculties. And didn't have a chance with Griggin any more than anyone else would have a chance with Lenna.

Beatrice slowly made her way across the bridge, and then stopped, turned to the fire. Lenna frowned. Griggin did the same thing; stare down into the roiling cauldron of sheer infinite power, thinking on how to make it his servant. But something in Beatrice's bearing was... off. Slowly, Lenna got to her feet, looking intently at Beatrice. Beatrice pulled her hood down over her eyes. Her shoulders were hunched. She took a step forward, onto the raised edge of the bridge. Lenna took a deep breath and sprinted towards her, staff in hand. Beatrice had one foot on the ground, one on the wall that did little more than remind people that this was where the bridge ended. Lenna ran faster, gathering up her mana. With a shout, she raised a hand, and let her magic flow. A block of ice appeared from nowhere around Beatrice's feet, pinning her to the bridge. She swayed back and forth between the fire and the hard stone of the bridge, crying out in fear. Lenna closed her eyes and *blinked*. She disappeared, then re-appeared next to Beatrice. Dropping her staff, she grabbed her, both arms round the middle, and dragged her back from the edge, landing on her back with Beatrice on top of her. She rolled Beatrice off her, then held her in her arms as if she were a child. Tears streamed down Beatrice's

face, and her teeth were chattering.

"Lenna?"

"Yes. Easy now. I've got you."

"Lenna..."

"Shh. You're safe."

Beatrice looked up into Lenna's face.

"I... I made a pass at Griggin. I'm so sorry."

Lenna slowly rocked back and forth.

"I know. He told me. Don't worry. You're safe.

Everything's going to be alright. Everything'll be just fine."

"He *told* you?"

"Yes."

Beatrice sobbed.

"You're so, so lucky. You'll never know how lucky you are."

"I do know. Trust me, I do. Come with me."

Lenna dragged Beatrice to her feet, held her arm as she walked with her to the Stonefire Tavern, to a quiet dark corner. Mr. Smolt recognised her, and came to the table.

"Good morning Mrs. Steambender, Mrs. Glowpipe. How may I help you today?"

"Hello Stephen." Lenna looked at Beatrice, then back at Mr. Smolt. "Could you bring us one red wine and a glass of cold milk?"

"Of course, Mrs. Steambender." He moved in the direction of the bar.

Beatrice sat at the table, head bent down, elbows on the table, quiet, miserable. Lenna reached over, and put her hand on Beatrice's wrist. She looked up, and Lenna shuddered at the expression on her face.

"Beatrice, why?"

Beatrice sobbed.

"Why not? Nobody wants me anymore, and what I want, I can't get."

"Nobody? Anton?"

Beatrice gave a small nod, quietly.

"Is he divorcing you? Leaving you?"

"No."

Lenna looked at Beatrice. Beatrice looked back at her.

"He doesn't even see the point in divorcing me."

Lenna gently stroked Beatrice's arm, noting, in the background of her mind, that there were no scars on her wrists. She breathed in, and there was no alcohol on Beatrice's breath.

"Why don't you just leave?"

"Can't," said Beatrice. "I can't."

"Why not?"

Beatrice looked up into Lenna's eyes. Lenna shuddered at the sheer desperation in that look.

"I love him. He's not a bad man, and I love him."

Lenna shook her head, suddenly resolute.

"You need to get out."

"That's what I-"

"Shut up. Do you have any family? Who aren't living on your doorstep? Friends? Anyone at all?"

"I don't-"

"Beatrice, answer the question. Family? Do you have any? If so, where."

"My... my sister, she's moved to Thelsamar by Loch Modan."

"Perfect. Go visit her. Fresh air, maybe some hard work. Maybe you'll come back, maybe not. But you can't live with Anton for a while."

"My sister hates my guts."

"Good. About time you made it up with her."

"But... Anton?"

"He'll be here when you get back."

"He's not a bad man, Lenna. Please, believe me."

"I believe you. Still, you need to be away from him for a while."

"I... I can't. He, he still needs me."

"His loss." Lenna put her hand on Beatrice's cheek.

"You know you have to."

Mr. Smolt came to their table, a tray in his hand with one elegant long glass of red wine, and one large glass of milk. With a quick glance at both their faces, he put the glasses on the table between them. Lenna reached for her purse, but Mr. Smolt waved a hand at her.

"These are on the house, Madam."

"Thank you, Stephen," said Lenna.

Beatrice lifted her arm to pick up the wine glass, but Lenna was too quick for her.

"Cheers," said Lenna, and drained the wine in one long draught, leaving Beatrice to stare first at her, then at the dew-covered glass of cold cow's milk on the table in front of her.

Lenna put her glass down, and turned her eyes to Beatrice.

"Go on. Drink it. It's good for you."

Griggin came home to find his wife lying on the sofa, a cold towel over her eyes, clutching a mug of tea in her hands.

"Are you alright, dear?"

Lenna groaned.

"I went to Stonefire today, and had my first glass of red wine in forty years. Could hardly get Bieslook home. Ye gods, I'm such a cheap date."

Griggin hung up his coat by the door. Lenna lifted the towel off her face, and squinted at his astonished face.

"I may have caused IGNITE to lose an engineer today," she said. "Sorry."

Griggin lifted Lenna's legs, sat down on the sofa and put them back on his knees. Lenna put the towel back over her eyes.

"Beatrice?"

Lenna nodded, carefully.

"She wanted to jump into the lake of lava today. I could only just stop her. She's gone. Put her on the bird

today."

"Jump into the lake? Oh my... She wanted to *kill* herself?"

"I don't suppose she wanted to get nice and clean."

"My goodness. Does Anton know?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but I'm having a hard time caring about how Mr. Glowpipe feels about it all."

"Hmm..."

Lenna peeked out from under her towel.

"And you're *not* telling him where she's gone.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"So where is she, then?"

"Friends. Family. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not. Oh my. Poor Beatrice."

Griggin sighed, and put his hand on Lenna's head.

"You did well. Hope she'll be alright."

"I don't know if I did well. Poor woman couldn't stay, though."

Griggin's hand slowly stroked Lenna's leg. He stared at the opposite wall, the corkboard with notes on it about who was to go where, and when. One of Bieslook's drawings, of a Titan wielding an axe.

"Let's try not to do what they did, my love."

"Working on it."

File GSB-067: Rumbblings.

Griggin walked through the corridor that connects the Mystic Ward to the Forlorn Cavern. The Forlorn Cavern was a place for quiet contemplation, with a small, still, underground pool and only a few shops that sold mostly religious items, ingredients for potions and material for enchantments. Griggin liked this place, even though it had become the prime spot for the Circle to have secret meetings. Rather than go against tradition, Griggin had asked Bezoar to meet him here. Griggin saw Bezoar standing by the pool, deep in conversation with a Human woman. She was wearing a robe, hood pulled up over her face. The robe fit her well, and she had pulled it tight round herself so that it followed the curves of her body. Griggin moved where Bezoar could see him, and Bezoar gave the woman a polite nod, spoke a few words. The woman looked at his back as he joined Griggin.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Morning Bezoar. Have you made a friend?"

"I wouldn't go that far, Sir. She wanted to know where the enchanting trainer was, and we started talking about enchanting in general."

Griggin looked at the woman, who was still looking in their direction. When she saw Griggin looking at her, she turned round and walked towards the Hall of Explorers.

"Well, time to get started," said Griggin. "Today we will concentrate on the important skill of sensing Daemons with one's mind. We can, of course, only sense the Daemon's hither projection, unless we were fool enough to enter the Daemon's demesne." Griggin smiled. "Which would be a singular enjoyment, and a brief one. I will summon my Imp, Ruptik, and have him walk round you. I want you to follow him with your eyes closed, and point at him when I say."

"Yes, Sir."

"But first, let's find a more private place. I find that summoning Daemons in town upsets people."

"That is because people are afraid of them, because they do not know them."

"Possibly," said Griggin. "But a persuasive argument may be made that they would fear them even more if they *did* know what they are, and what they are

capable of."

"That may well be the case," said Bezoar, with a hint of a laugh in his voice. "I feared the Daemons greatly, until I learnt how to control them. I do not fear them now, though. My knowledge protects me."

Griggin looked at Bezoar. "*Don't* get complacent, young Warlock. We cannot possibly know all that is to know about them. It is when we think that we know everything that they surprise us and try to have us for lunch."

"Yes, Master," said Bezoar.

Griggin let that pass. They found a quiet spot somewhere in the snowy valley of Dun Morogh, and Griggin summoned his imp, Ruptik.

"What is it now?"

Griggin bowed his head to the creature, even smaller than a Gnome and nowhere near as handsome.

"Ruptik, I wish my student to see you as you were meant to be seen, with the mind. But I do not trust him, so I will ask him to close his eyes. You will walk round him, quiet as you can, and he will try to see you with his mind, and point his finger at you."

Ruptik sneered at Bezoar "You are right not to trust him. He looks like he'd try to cheat. If I were you, I'd poke his eyes out to make sure he doesn't."

"But I need him to see afterwards. How will he read the tomes of lore without his eyes?"

"Pah! If he doesn't know them yet, then he's not worthy."

"Nevertheless, he must keep his eyes, because that suits my purposes. Now attention Bezoar, close your eyes. Don't peek. Ruptik, move to a random place."

Griggin and Bezoar spent some time with Ruptik wandering this way and that, while Bezoar pointed him out. To start with, Bezoar would sometimes point in the wrong direction, making Ruptik explode with cackling laughter, which was not helping the exercise. Soon, though, Bezoar improved, and pointed at the Imp without fail. Griggin dismissed Ruptik, and summoned Hurzag, his Voidwalker, who glided this way and that, noiselessly, without comment. Finally, he dismissed Hurzag, and summoned a Daemon that he did not summon often. People who didn't know better usually had no trouble referring to an Imp, Voidwalker, or the four-legged Felhunter as "it". A Daemon's hither presence did not need to reproduce, and gender was

merely ornamental. This one, however, was extremely difficult not to refer to as "she".

"Why Master... You wish your student *not* to look at me?"

Darva, the Succubus bound to Griggin, licked a long, long-nailed finger, and ran it between large, artfully sculpted breasts, looking into Bezoar's eyes. A thin line of dark blood appeared, only to heal up almost immediately. Darva laughed, a sound of joy that nevertheless sent shivers up one's spine.

"And they say *I* am cruel."

"For perfectly good reasons," said Griggin. "Bezoar, close your eyes. Note how the imprint on your mind differs from that of Imps or voidwalkers. Darva, move. Quietly."

Darva conceded to move to a spot behind Bezoar, off to one side. Bezoar pointed at it without fail. Griggin pointed, and Darva moved, with Bezoar following with his eyes closed, finger never wavering an inch from the Daemon.

"Oh I can tell, he wants me," said Darva.

"That will be enough, Darva," said Griggin. "Please return to your demesne in peace, with my thanks for your help."

"Well, that was fun," said Darva. "Perhaps next time, we'll kill something?"

The Daemon faded to nothing. Bezoar put his hands in front of him, in the long sleeves of his robes. He bowed his head towards Griggin.

"How did I do, Sir?"

"Very well, Bezoar. I'm quite pleased with your progress."

"That latest Daemon, the Succubus... do people not see through her deceptions? She was trying to seduce me, even though she knew I could see her for what she really was."

Griggin laughed. "Darva definitely wasn't trying hard. Succubi are well aware of our most powerful emotions and driving forces, and use them to our detriment."

"I would be aware of her trying to control me, and that would activate my mental defences. She would not be able to penetrate them."

Griggin gave Bezoar a little grin.

"It," he said.

Nix spotted Dora coming out of her school. Not everybody stopped to look at her, which as far as Nix

was concerned was his gain and their loss. She gave him a quick glance as he caught up with her.

"Hiya! I got something for you. I hear you're a herbalist."

"Yeah?"

"So I got you some herbs."

Nix handed Dora a small box. In it was a small selection of flowers and herbs. He'd spent the afternoon outside gathering them all. Dora looked at the display, then up at Nix.

"You're not a herbalist yourself, are you?"

"Nope. I do engineering and mining. Always after the ores, I am. Look, I spot-welded a few leftover bits of copper tube together to put them in, in a bit of water. Keep them fresh."

"Hmm. Well, if you'd have asked a herbalist, you'd know. This is Kingsblood. You need to get it out of the ground, roots and all, because you need both the petals and the roots for mana potions."

"Oh," said Nix, and his face sagged.

"Bloody hard to get out of the ground intact, especially if the ground is dry or frozen. The roots are quite delicate, and if you break them, the sap runs out."

"I see," said Nix, mentally kicking himself for not doing the research. For goodness' sake, his own sister did herbalism. He could have asked her.

"Thanks, though. They do smell nice even if I can't use them for potions."

"No worries." Nix beamed at Dora. "So how *do* you get the roots out in one piece?"

"Mucking in. You loosen the soil with your fingers and pull very, very gently."

"Hmmm," said Nix. Then, he suddenly grinned. "I've just thought of something. Enjoy your herbs see you later."

Nix waved. Dora looked at the purple flowers in her hands. Well, he probably meant well. And the little, well, vases were actually quite nice for an improvised job. Dora watched Nix disappear into the tunnel leading to the Commons, shook her head and walked home.

The IGNITE workshop in Tinker Town usually rang to the sound of hammers on anvils, the whine of power tools, and the screams of metal being shaped. At the moment, the tools were silent, and the Gnomes themselves were making the noise. Chint Waterspray

sat on one of the workbenches, tobacco pouch in one hand, piece of *vloo* in the other. He was observing his fellow engineers facing off, glaring at each other, as he rolled the cigarette between his fingers. Finally! Griggin and Anton had been glaring at each other for a week now, and it was getting on his nerves. It looked like a nice refreshing shouting match was coming.

"Well, she'd still be here if that wife of yours hadn't told her to up stakes and run."

"Opinions on that differ," said Griggin.

"And it didn't occur to you to ask where she might have gone?"

"She didn't say," said Griggin. "Lenna's opinion was that spending some time away from you would be beneficial to Beatrice's general well-being. I find myself unable to argue against that. Perhaps if you could provide a cogent argument..."

"She's my *wife*, dammit!"

"Indeed. All that I have, I share with you. All that I am, I give to you. I will love you, comfort you, honour and keep you, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, and be faithful to you as long as we both shall live."

Anton knew exactly what Griggin meant. His eyes burnt with fire.

"So you heard about that, did you? Figured it out yourself? Well sod you, and the sanctimonious holier-than-thou horse you rode in on. Do you think I was the only one in the arrangement to sleep out of doors now and then? What if I told you that my poor, long-suffering wife was the first to start it? Actually, I'm surprised that she didn't try it on with either of you. Chint?"

Chint licked the piece of paper and, mindful of the prohibition against smoking in the workshop, stuck the roll-up behind his ear for later.

"Can't say that I ever had the pleasure of her intimate acquaintance. Which is a great pity."

Anton looked at Griggin. "You, perhaps?"

Griggin said nothing. Anton grinned.

"Well bless my welds, she did, didn't she? Enjoy it?"

"I declined her offer," said Griggin. "For reasons stated."

Anton scowled. "You think I don't love her, do you? You think I don't bloody *care* that she was ready to throw herself off the sodding bridge. Do you think I

married Beatrice for her *tits*?" Anton took a deep breath and bent forward a bit, looking deep into Griggin's eyes. "Beatrice has the most brilliant engineering mind that it has been my privilege ever to encounter. Even after two bottles of wine, she can think *rings* around anyone in this room, including myself. Simply being in the same room she's in, as she thinks up designs so simple and elegant, that everyone who ever welded two pipes together should spend the rest of their life kicking themselves for not thinking of them, is better than a night with a hundred of the most beautiful women on the planet."

A long, deep silence fell. Eventually, Chint chuckled to himself. Anton glared at him.

"You see something *funny*, Mr. Waterspray?"

Chint grinned broadly.

"You were only using her for techs," he said. He retrieved his cigarette from behind his ear, and walked out of the shop, laughing, fumbling in his pocket for a lighter.

Anton looked back at Griggin.

"Well, wherever she is, I hope she comes back soon. Because without her, we're screwed."

The Gomeregan Warlock Circle in Exile was in session in their secret headquarters. Griggin sat in his usual place in a dark corner of the room, admittedly thinking more of pipes, steam, heat transfer and wives than about the lack of new young warlocks lately. People had noticed that of late, the influx of new fresh-faced Warlock boys and girls was at a bit of a low. Actually, they had managed to help three boys, not counting Bezoar, but no girls at all. Acting Chief Briarthorn thought this was a good sign, because evidently, fewer and fewer children were discovered with part of their minds in the Twisting Nethers, for which he was profoundly grateful. The Gnome looked so wonderfully optimistic that nobody thought of putting forward an alternative explanation: That they were simply missing them and Ironforge was due an outbreak of dark magic. Everybody was quite content to let that problem be somebody else's. Even Griggin had to admit that he probably should be looking harder, but what with his new charge, and a sudden load of design work that had been dropped on him due to Beatrice leaving, he was too busy to take on another task.

The meeting ended with a small ritual of welcome to the new Warlocks. Bezoar and a few other boys, one

Human, two Gnomes. Griggin was cautiously proud of Bezoar's accomplishments. He had added a Voidwalker to his arsenal, and could do a respectable Rain of Fire. Griggin was watching him carefully for signs of relapse, but so far, none had come. Chief Briarthorn closed the meeting, and people filed out.

Griggin walked to his own small workshop. The air between him and Anton Glowpipe had not quite cleared yet, and he preferred to work by himself. Despite Anton's warnings, they were coping, and exceptionally brilliant feats of design were not needed. This was simple, solid engineering grindwork. Distribution pipes to the major areas in Ironforge. Primary and secondary pump stations, based mostly on Griggin's Optimal Prime pumps, but optimised for throughput, not temperature. They were making slow, steady progress, the customers were happy, and didn't grumble too much about the gold this was all costing.

Griggin opened the door to his workshop to find Nix already there, at the large workbench, assembling some kind of mechanism.

"Evening Son. What are you working on?"

Nix showed his father his device. It was a length of copper pipe, with three prongs sticking out. A few

adjusting wheels were on the other end of the pipe.

"It's a present for this girl I know," said Nix. "It's a herbalising fork, basically, except I added a whirring gizmo so the prongs vibrate and loosen the soil around the roots of the herb, and you can extract it without damaging the root."

"Sounds like a good idea," said Griggin. "Are those prongs spring-loaded?"

"Yep. You can set them to the width of the individual plant's root system."

"Hmm. You'd better add a sheath for them. They look sharp. Someone could hurt themselves."

"They *are* sharp, so yeah, I will. Look."

Nix pulled up a bucket he'd filled with sand, well stamped down. He wound up his device, then pushed it into the sand. There was a buzzing noise, and the fork sunk down easily.

"Every girl needs a hammer drill," said Nix. "You can even adjust the intensity of the vibrations to the optimum between speed of descent and risk of damage to the herb."

Griggin nodded. "Ingenious." He watched Nix loosen the sand in the bucket with his new tool. Nix looked

pleased with himself. "So you have found a friend, then?"

"Yeah. She's one of Trixie's classmates. Hope she likes this."

"Well, it looks very well made. Pay enough attention to the finish, and I daresay you have a winner."

Griggin finished his notes on where to locate one of the main water pumps near the Mystic Ward. From there, hot and cold water would be pumped all over Death Valley. And just in time for lunch, too. Griggin wandered over to one of his favourite restaurants at the very end. The food was still good there. Further down, it deteriorated into bits of he dared not guess what creature, with sauce freshly scooped out of the Great Forge, mixed with sulphuric acid and enough garlic to kill any vampire, or for that matter any Gnome, in a thirty yard radius. He walked in, and ordered his usual. While he waited, he went over his notes once more. This part of Ironforge was mostly sandstone, so drilling would be easy. Griggin added up lengths of pipe till his lunch arrived. He gave the innkeeper a grateful look, and tucked in. He frowned. The innkeeper noticed, and walked over.

"Is something the matter, Sir?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with this as such, but didn't you tell your daughter I was here? She usually puts in more spices for me."

"Forgive me, Sir. I didn't know. This wasn't prepared by me daughter, I did it meself."

"Oh? She's not ill, I hope?"

"I don't know, Sir," said the Inkeeper. "She's disappeared, and we cannot find her. It's a worry, as she's not wont to wander off on her own for so long. We fear she may have come to harm."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Sir. Don't give up hope."

The Dwarf looked out of the window, shaking his head.

"Something dreadful has happened to her, I feel it in me bones." He shook himself. "I beg your pardon, Sir. I didnae mean to saddle you with my troubles."

"If I can help in any way, you have but to ask."

"Thank you. Enjoy your meal, Sir."

There was a scream in the night. Lenna woke up, stepped out of bed, and went to the small space where Bieslook's bed was. Bieslook was sitting up, staring at

the wall, tears rolling down her cheeks. Lenna sat down on the bed with her, and pulled her onto her lap.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Papa is not coming back."

Lenna held Bieslook close to her, and gently rocked her.

"No, he isn't. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"I want my papa."

"I know."

More sobs followed.

"He made too much fire, and then he went away."

"That was so the Troggs wouldn't get you, sweetie. He made the Troggs go away too." Lenna looked into Bieslook's eyes. "He wanted you to live, and be happy."

"I want my papa."

Lenna held Bieslook close to her, gently stroking her hair. Nothing else that she could do for the young girl. Finally the sobbing stopped.

"You can let go now," said Bieslook. "I'm better."

"Don't want to," said Lenna.

Bieslook wriggled a bit, making herself more comfortable on Lenna's lap. They sat together, by the flickering light of a candle, for some time. Then, Lenna

put Bieslook back in bed, pulled the blanket over her.

"Thank you," said Lenna.

"Will I be a mage, like papa?"

Lenna stroked Bieslook's hair. "*Nobody* is going to be a mage like your papa. You're going to be good, though. You've got the gift."

"Can already shoot fire."

"That's just for emergencies, dear."

"What's an emercery?"

"E-mer-gen-cy. It's when bad people want to hurt you, like the Troggs."

"E-mer-gen-cy."

"That's right. You don't want to get those headaches you do just for playing."

"No."

"Good night, sweetheart."

"G'night."

Lenna returned to her bed, to find her dear husband had taken over most of it. She grabbed his leg, and flung it across, making him turn over.

"Gmwlf," said Griggin, accusingly, and slept on. Lenna got back in bed.

"That's what you *always* say."

File GSB-070: Outburst

"Dora! Wait up, I got something for you."

Dora Rainfist stopped, as Nix ran up to her, eyes shining.

"Something for me?"

"You're going to love this," said Nix. "Behold!"

Nix handed Dora a smooth, metal cylinder, polished to a nice shine. Three small wheels were at one end, the other end was rounded. Dora's eyes narrowed.

"What... is this?"

"Well, remember what you told me, about getting your fingers dirty pulling at the stalks and all that? This is the solution! You just set it to the setting you want, and away you go! No matter how dry or how cold it is, doesn't matter. It slides right in! I tried it myself, and it works great!"

Dora said nothing, but she said it *very* loudly. She turned the shining metal cylinder round in her hand, and noticed a button at the end. Against her better judgement, she pressed it. There was a buzzing noise,

as the thing shook in her hand.

"Whoa," said Nix. "That's a bit premature, you need to take the bottom off first. Want me to show you how it works?"

Trixie walked in, to find Nix sitting at the table, head on his hand, looking dejected.

"Hi Bro! What's for dinner?"

"Steak," said Nix, tersely.

Trixie looked, and now saw that Nix was holding half their dinner against his face.

"Eww! Well done for me, please. Why are you cuddling a piece of meat?"

"Dora," said Nix.

Trixie snorted. "Pothole on the road to bliss?"

Nix sneered, found this hurt and stopped. He looked up at Trixie.

"I don't get it. I really don't. I spent *ages* on this thing, to get it just right, then I give it to her and she bloody clocks me!"

"Give her... what?"

Nix pointed at the table. Trixie looked at the thing. Her jaw dropped.

"You gave her a *personal massager*? What by the rampaging Titans were you *thinking*? You're lucky to be alive, you stupid..."

Nix stared at Trixie, pale-faced with terror.

"*That's* what she thought it was? Oh... *crap!*"

"You mean it isn't a joy buzzer?"

Nix handed Trixie his steak, and picked up the thing. He gave the lower end a quick twist, and pulled it off. Sharp prongs extended with a click. Turning the wheel, he spread the fork wider, and stood it on its end. He pressed the button, and it started to vibrate, dancing on the table.

"It's a herbalising fork with vibrating action to loosen the soil. Works even in dry clay or in frozen soil. You can get the plant out without damaging the roots."

Trixie stared at the bloody steak in her hand, then up at Nix' bruised face. He really wasn't kidding. Trixie bit her lip, trying not to... oh what the hell. She rolled onto her back, helpless with laughter.

"It's *not* funny!"

"You're... right," said Trixie, fighting for breath. "It's not..." She looked at Nix' face again, and almost rolled under the table.

"Sis! I need your help. You have to explain to her that it's not... that I'm not..."

Trixie somehow managed to control herself. She slapped the steak back into Nix' hand, and grinned at him.

"If I do, you owe me big time, Bro. Oh, and by the way, put that steak back in the pan. It isn't helping you any. Try ice instead."

"Really?"

"I spend my days being beaten up by class-mates. I should know."

Dora saw Trixie walk up, and glared at her. Trixie sat down opposite her and put her tray down. She studied the meat, trying to guess what creature it came from. Since there was apple sauce to go with it, probably pork, though the Mensa Silex was known to throw people off by doing chicken with cranberries.

"That *brother* of yours," said Dora.

Trixie smiled sweetly. "What about him?"

"Just when I thought he wasn't all that bad. I should have known better. Little pervert."

Trixie tried a bit of potato. Hmm. Bit crunchy.

"Really? I didn't know. What'd he do, talk about polishing pipes? He means that literally, you know."

"He gave me a present to use on lonely nights." Dora seethed. "It vibrates. Tested it out on himself, he said."

"Ah," said Trixie. She reached behind her, and pulled something out of her bag. "This, perhaps?"

Dora stared at the beautifully-crafted metal cylinder. Trixie grinned.

"I tried it, too. It really does work very well."

"Is that supposed to convince me that you Steambenders *aren't* a bunch of complete and utter..."

Trixie raised a finger. "Observe."

She twisted off the bottom half of the cylinder, and pointed the sharp ends at Dora's face.

"It's a herbalising tool. Now, much as I love to see Big Brother squirm, I can't have you thinking that the Steambender family consists only of perverts. Nix may hardly know one end of a girl from the other, but the gizmos he makes usually work."

Dora blinked, staring at the sharp ends.

"Oh gods..."

"Well, you can *still* use it on lonely nights, if you want, but I believe the Lordaeic word for that is

Zweckentfremdet."

"Oh boy. I owe him an apology."

"Don't be silly. That'll only give him ideas. Mind you."

Trixie stirred the mass of goo on her plate to keep it from congealing. "He's taken to muttering your name in his sleep, and I sleep three feet over him. So in the interest of my night's rest, would you please either tell him to sod off, or jump him?"

"Aww... Had a bad night's sleep?"

"Ugh," said Trixie, with her mouth full.

Dora grinned. "You're sparring with me!"

Merchants were the most unreasonable people imaginable. They would never take back any of the equipment you bought off them for anywhere near the original buying price. Richard tried to explain his standpoint to the Dwarf, as to how a weapon became much more valuable once it had been tested and found to work correctly, and he would give it his unreserved recommendation to anyone who'd ask. The Dwarf was not receptive to this argument. Richard sighed, and took back his small, small stack of silver coins. As he turned round, he heard someone mention the words

"Two-and-two." Richard plied his face in its usual friendly poker-face smile, and turned to the speaker.

"Hello. I'm sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing you, and I know someone who'd rather not go by that particular nickname. Are we talking about the same person, perhaps?"

"Oh, I don't know. Pink pigtails like any other girl? So far up her own arse that she can see what she's had for dinner? Along, I might say, with many other people?"

Richard smiled at Barry Blackknife. People who knew him soon learnt to recognise that smile and get out of melee range, even out of throwing range for that matter.

"No," said Richard. "That doesn't describe the person I was thinking of at all. Which is fortunate, because I happen to like her quite a lot, and anyone who'd describe her like that, would be in a whole world of hurt."

Barry laughed. "They would, would they? So *you* are her new flame? Well, well. *E pluribus unum*, I'd say."

"I wouldn't go as far as to claim that," said Richard. "But a Gnome's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's heaven for?"

"Oh, if grasping is what you want, I can tell you a few things she likes. Don't bother trying to make her scream. She's a quiet one."

There was a loud bang behind Richard, and they looked round at the Dwarf merchant. He had one of his maces in one hand, and was shaking it at the boys.

"Lads, It's well I know how well my weapons work, and if there's any demonstratin' to be done in this shop, it's going ta be yours truly that does it. Now take it outside." The Dwarf scowled. "Please."

Richard, Barry and his mates walked out of the shop. Outside, Barry faced Richard, arms wide.

"Well? Want a piece of me? Come on then, don't be shy."

"Not really, no. Frankly, the idea of facing the Mighty Hunter of Gol'bolar Troggs makes me shake in my boots. You could probably drink me under the table just by looking at me."

"That's what I thought," said Barry. "Well, next time you snuggle up to Two-and-two, you can tell her that I'm going to be in her class soon."

"Heh. You mean you're going to play 'kill the melon' with one of *our* class? That'll be fun."

"Already did once," said Barry. "This can't be much harder."

"Barry Sodding Blackknife."

"None other," said Richard. "Mind you, he said I should snuggle up to you before telling you."

"How did that loser manage to convince Tosslespanner that he was ready?" Trixie turned her eyes to Richard. "And why *aren't* you snuggling up to me?"

"I'll decide for myself when to snuggle up to you, thankyouverymuch. Mr. Blackknife can go jump off a cliff."

"Fair enough."

Richard got a bit closer to Trixie. Because he wanted to, not because anyone had told him. Trixie met Richard coming the other way and all was well.

"He's the guy who gave you a hard time?"

Trixie nodded.

"Well, if he tries to join this class, you'll get to hit him."

"Yes," said Trixie, with shining eyes.

Circle of sand. Pole. Melon. Barry Blackknife stood in the middle, arms crossed, looking supremely confident. Word had got round about this Gnome. People who sparred with him rarely got away without injury. People even said he'd been duelling a lot, and there were rumours of one Human having died from injuries sustained while fighting him. Nothing ever proven, of course. Just rumours. But he certainly looked the part.

"Alright then," said Trainer Tosslespanner. "Who wants to be the defender for Mr. Blackknife?"

Trixie jumped up, hand as high as any Gnome could achieve. Jonno raised his hand. Richard looked at him, reached up and pulled Jonno's arm down.

"What?"

Richard grinned, nodded at Trixie. "I want to see this."

Jonno looked at Trixie's face, fierce, eyes burning, full of the light of battle. He whistled.

"Grudge match?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Bilban Tosslespanner pointed. "Miss Steambender. A rematch, I believe. Very well, prepare yourself."

Trixie handed her shield and mace to Richard, and got out her two-handed sword. She stepped forward.

"Um, Miss Steambender? Are you sure you don't want a shield?"

Trixie looked at her trainer, and shook her head. "No, Sir. I'm in a two-hander kind of mood today."

"Your choice," said the trainer.

Trixie walked out into the sandpit, and drew her sword. She swished it around a few times, to loosen up her muscles, and looked at Barry.

"Two-and-two. This is going to be easier than I thought. Are you sure I can't persuade you to lie down on your back?"

Trixie got a good grip on her sword, and fixed Barry with a stare.

"Last time, you bastard, I let you win because I was stupid enough to want you in my class. *This* time, I'm going to beat every colour of shit out of you because I *don't* want you in my class. Any questions?"

Trainer Tosslespanner picked up the hourglass.

"Ready?"

Trixie raised her arm. "Wait!"

"Miss Steambender?"

"I want to waive the time limit," said Trixie. "Let him try as long as he wants."

"Would you like to tell me why?"

"No."

"Very well, then. Prepare yourselves."

Barry growled at Trixie. "This'll be over very soon, and then it'll hurt a long, long time."

Trixie crouched down, and said nothing.

"Fight!"

Trixie launched herself at Barry, sword raised high. Barry raised his shield and swung his mace round, but Trixie swept low, at Barry's legs. The impact made him lose his footing, and he almost fell over. Trixie spotted the direction he was falling in, and assisted a bit with a stab to the chest. A big tear appeared in Barry's chestpiece, and he rolled back to avoid being spitted. Trixie followed up with a viciously fast sweep downwards, which Barry could only just turn aside with his shield. He swung his mace as he lay on the floor and scored a chest shot. Trixie only managed to dodge part of it, and she grunted.

"You *still* hit like a girl."

Barry pulled his knees up, planted both feet in Trixie's stomach, and pushed her away. Trixie rolled back, and jumped to her feet again, quick as water. Barry shoved his shield into her and tried to push her back. Trixie didn't give an inch.

"Give it up. You're still pretty now. Give me any more grief and I'll rip your face to shreds. Then see how that wimp of a boyfriend of yours likes you."

Trixie only pushed harder. Barry tried to twist out of the way to make Trixie fall over, but she was too fast for him. Maces aren't naturally good weapons to parry with, and Barry caught Trixie's slash on his arm bracer. Something went *snap* and it hung loose off his arm.

"Better watch out," said Trixie. "You may need that hand tonight, for comfort."

Barry leapt a half-step back and swung his mace down, aiming for Trixie's head. Trixie dodged, only to run straight into the edge of Barry's shield. She cried out, and ignoring the pain, launched into a series of stabs and sweeps, hitting home as often as not, until Barry was driven back further and further. Barry crouched down, and launched himself forward. Trixie jumped to one side, let Barry pass and slashed at his back. Something gave in Barry's chest piece, and it

sagged on his shoulders.

Forgetting that he was now between Trixie and the melon of desire, Barry turned round to face Trixie, hate burning in his eyes. He swung his mace round in large circles, then raised his shield and tried to slam the edge into Trixie's face. Trixie ducked down, stabbed at Barry's shield arm. Barry cried out in pain and frustration. He swung his mace round, but Trixie parried it with such force that he lost his grip on it, and it ended up swinging by its wrist strap. Trixie found her chance, and swung her sword at Barry's weapon arm. In an amazing piece of luck, her sword sliced the wrist strap and the mace was sent flying.

Trixie growled. "Got you, you bastard. Say hello to the priest when you see him."

"Hold!" shouted Bilban Tosslespanner, but Trixie either didn't hear, or didn't listen. Her sword came alive in her hands, and battered down on Barry's shield and armour, until it hung in tatters around him. It was all Barry could do to get out of sword's reach. Trixie screamed, stepped on Barry's weapon arm and stabbed down at his throat. Her sword stuck in the sand, less than an inch away from Barry's neck. Trixie looked over her shoulder at the trainer.

"That's a fail, isn't it, Sir?"

Bilban Tosslespanner frowned. It wasn't uncommon for students to settle grievances this way, but he'd rather they didn't. "Yes Miss Steambender, that's a fail. Well done. Please return to your seat."

Trixie bent down, and looked into Barry's eyes.

"Don't try that again."

Trixie turned her back on Barry, and walked back to her classmates, who were cheering. Barry got back on his feet, and picked up his mace. He limped to the pole still holding the melon, swung his mace and smashed it.

"Hey! No time limit! I win!"

All it earned him was a weary look from trainer Tosslespanner.

"Go get your kit fixed, Mr. Blackknife."

Trixie joined her class mates, Gemma, Jonno, Dora, and especially Richard. For some reason, she had trouble seeing out of her right eye, but her left eye gave all the information she needed. Richard was grinning at her like a maniac. Trixie felt a big strong hand on her shoulder, and someone pulled at her helm strap.

"Let me get that off for ye," said Gemma. "And I'll see if I have some bandages for that."

"Right, folks. New homework assignments for you all." Fenthwick looked round the room, at all the happy, eager faces. "Hold on, has anyone seen Farglik?"

Nix raised his hand. "Saw him a while back, over by the Pool. I can give him his note if you want."

"Thank you, Mr. Steambender. That's all. Good luck, and class dismissed."

Nix walked out to the Forlorn Pool, and spotted Farglik sitting next to someone who sold strange fish-like creatures as pets. Nix wandered over, thinking about Dora. Trix had told him she'd explained all, but he hadn't had the heart to look her up yet. Farglik looked up at him.

"Hiya Farglik. What are you doing here, man?"

"Lag," said Farglik.

Nix sat down next to Farglik. Lag. Few words in this world were so short, and said so much. Lag was that paralysis of the mind, that dull, fog-like feeling that meant that you couldn't see the point in putting one foot in front of the other, or even to proceed from one

thought to the next. Nix sighed.

"Women!" said Nix.

"Dude!" said Farglik, looking at Nix.

"Why do they have to make everything so bloody difficult?"

"Dude?"

"I mean, I mean... Dora. She's *gorgeous*."

"Right on," said Farglik, a little smile on his lips.

"And it'd be great just to, well you know, do things with her. Go riding to Kharanos. Show her some of the cool things I've made."

"Okie," said Farglik, with a small nod.

"And of course, one of the nice things you *can* do, is go somewhere private, and have a bit of a cuddle. But I'm not going to make her do anything she doesn't want. Hah! As if I could!"

"Dude!"

"I mean, what would be the point?"

"Dude?"

"So now, she thinks I'm weird, at best, and a perv at the worst."

"Sure," said Farglik. He seemed to think a moment, then opened his mouth to say something, but Nix

waved his hand.

"Of course, I don't *know* that for sure. I suppose the only way I can find out is to go find her."

"Right on," said Farglik.

"Yeah, you're right. I *should* just go find her. Oh by the way, Fenthwick gave me this to give to you. It's your homework. Probably another obstacle course."

The envelope was identical to the official Guild envelopes all Rogues were given their assignments in. The idea was that having the real thing in their hands would make them better at spotting fakes. Farglik accepted Nix' envelope, and put it in his pack. He handed Nix a small melon. Nix smiled. It was one of Farglik's strange little ways, but as strangeness went, it wasn't a bad thing.

"Thanks Farglik," said Nix. "I think I'll go home and find Dora after dinner. Aren't you going home?"

Farglik sighed, stared at the dark far end of the Forlorn Pool.

"Lag," he said.

Nix nodded understandingly, waved and walked off, feeling a lot better. For some reason, talking to Farglik always cheered him up. And often as not, netted him a

melon, which was also nice. Nothing for it, then. Time to grab the tiger by the tail, and hope she wouldn't tear him to bits.

As Trixie walked into the Mensa Silex, she immediately spotted Richard sitting at a table with Dora and Jonno. Her eye was still bothering her, but the priest had said that it'd be fine, though she could expect a scar. It wasn't very large, next to her eyebrow. Richard thought it made her look badass, and Trixie felt absurdly pleased with that. She walked up to the table, and put her hand on Richard's shoulder.

"Hi people. How's tricks?"

Jonno looked up at her, not smiling at all.

"Sit down," he said.

Trixie did, looking at the faces round the table.

"What's up?"

Richard put a hand on Trixie's arm, looking into her eyes.

"Gemma's dead," he said.

Trixie stared. From their expressions, it was crystal clear that they weren't joking. She was absolutely sure that she'd heard Richard correctly. There was no

mistake, no joke. Gemma, the embodiment of a Warrior tank, force of nature, strong beyond compare... dead?

"They found her in the Deeprun Tram Station," said Dora.

Richard looked at the table, not wanting to look into anyone's eyes. Anger was on his face, and a deep, deep sadness.

"She didn't go easy," he said. "She was burnt, with fire, fighting. Till the very last."

"Somebody *killed* her?"

Richard nodded.

"Do they know who?"

"No. Mages, probably. I'd say Horde mages, but how can an Orc, or a Troll, get on the Deeprun Tram? Surely, the Humans in Stormwind have guards?"

"And where would they go?" Jonno looked angry. "It's not like anyone would miss a pair of sodding big tusks!"

"It's an inside job," said Dora. "Some damned traitor. If I get my hands on him, there won't be enough left to drag in front of a tribunal."

Jonno looked up. "Funeral's tomorrow. Dwarves aren't allowed to leave the dead unburied for more than

a day. We're all invited, because we fought with Gemma. Don't say anything unless they ask you. They're very particular about their rituals."

Trixie sat on a stone bench in a part of Ironforge where normally, only Dwarves were allowed to come. The hall was dimly lit by only four candles for a whole hall that could hold hundreds. Gemma's family wasn't large, maybe a dozen or so Dwarf men and women. Richard was sitting next to her. Trixie wanted to touch him, feel the comforting warmth of another body, but they didn't touch, fearing that even this could disturb the burial ritual. Trixie looked up at the stone coffin. It looked large. Inside was what remained of their friend. None of them had seen her, and the coffin would not be opened. The door at the end of the hall opened. In walked Gemma's father, her mother, and two of her sisters. They bore maces and double-headed axes. They took up their places at the four corners of the coffin, and a horn was blown. Trixie looked at their faces, grim, looking neither left nor right, but straight forward. As she watched, they closed their eyes, and Trixie felt a chill run up her spine. Magic was being used. The Holy Light was being petitioned to carry

Gemma Ironhand to the World Beyond. Gemma's father spoke, in Ancient Dwarvish. Lines of a poem never to be forgotten among Dwarves. Someone had given her a translation. Gryll Ironhand's voice sounded steady as a rock, and as full of minute cracks.

Made from the Light
Born from Stone.
Clad in Steel.
Tempered by Fire.

Stone can be crushed.
Steel can be molten.
Fire be extinguished.
But Light flows eternal.
Immortal, untouched.

Rest now, daughter.
Until the world's ending.

As the echo of his voice died out, lights emerged from the coffin, floating, spinning up to the ceiling of the

hallway, up through the roof, up, up, never wavering, never flickering. A Dwarf standing next to them motioned them to stand up, as all Dwarves did. Then, they filed out of the room, in perfect order. Trixie looked over her shoulder once. How she knew it, she couldn't say, but she knew that the coffin would be empty.

"Goodbye, Gemma," she whispered, too soft for even Richard to hear.

File GSB-076: Counterblast

Lenna put her hand on Trixie's shoulder, and put the mug of hot chocolate in front of her on the table. Trixie put her hands round the hot drink, miracle cure at Steambender Manor for years beyond reckoning. She smiled up at Lenna.

"Thanks, Mum."

Lenna squeezed Trixie's shoulder.

"Hey, I have an idea. Why don't you ask Richard and his father over for dinner tonight?"

Trixie looked up, said nothing.

"Shouldn't we meet the parent? I believe it *is* traditional. I may still have the baby pictures somewhere."

"You're going to show my bare bottom to a *stranger*?"

"Oh come on, Richard's not a stranger anymore. I want to meet your boyfriend's father!"

"He's *not* my boyfriend," said Trixie, automatically.

"Well, quit slacking then."

"Good evening Sir, Mustrum Sparkbolt at your service."

"Griggin Steambender, at yours. Allow me to introduce my wife, Lenna."

"Pleased to meet you," said Lenna, shaking Mr. Sparkbolt's hand.

Mustrum Sparkbolt gave Lenna a friendly nod.

"I think I knew a girl named Lenna, back when I was still at school in Gnomeregan. Well, I knew *of* her, not personally."

"Oh?"

"I'm sure that was someone else, though. She had quite a reputation."

"Did she?" Lenna gave him a brilliant smile, green eyes gleaming. Mustrum Sparkbolt stared, glanced at Griggin and shut up.

"Dinner's ready," said Lenna.

Richard and Trixie were allowed to sit next to each other, and they did. About two inches of empty space were between them, and after a quick glance at each other, they stared straight ahead. No force in Azeroth could have persuaded them to breach those last few

inches.

Wherever two Mages are present, there shall be discussions of frost magic as opposed to fire. Lenna, as a fire mage, was capable of the big blasts, but Mustrum was much better at snaring and trapping enemies, or slowing them down. Griggin sat back, not involving himself in the discussion, while Nix operated the coffee machine. The Game came out, and they started to play. Mustrum's style fitted his chosen magical specialisation, always making the moves that slowed other players down while slowly and steadily progressing to the goal. Richard's style was much like Trixie's, though Richard paid much more attention to his defence, while Trixie went on the full-out offensive. On this occasion, Nix got three lucky rolls in a row, and won. More coffee was made, and people sat back.

"Ugly business," said Mustrum. "That poor Dwarf girl. And of course, whenever someone gets burnt, they look at the Mages."

Lenna sneered. "Don't they, though? Like we're the only ones playing with matches."

"Personally, I suspect Daemons," said Mustrum. "Nasty creatures from the Twisting Nethers, looking to take over Azeroth."

"Quite possible," said Griggin, rubbing his chin. "Though Daemons wouldn't come all the way here by themselves. Someone would have to summon them."

"Warlocks," said Mustrum, the distaste clear in his voice.

"Indeed," said Griggin. "Though I fail to see the reason why any of us would attack someone in the city. Least of all an ally."

"What reason would any Warlock need? Simple desire to cause suffering seems a perfectly good reason to me." Mustrum Sparkbolt blinked. His eyes slowly turned to Griggin. An icy cold look was in them. "One of *us*, you say? Are *you* a Warlock?"

"I am," said Griggin. "And I am quite certain that nobody in our circle attacked young Gemma Ironhand. It would be an abuse of Demonic power. A first-order offence."

"Sir," said Mustrum Sparkbolt, "I am a guest in this house, and as such, my honour forbids me from replying to that in the way I would. But I do not intend to remain a guest here much longer. Richard, we are leaving."

Griggin heard the door close behind Richard and his father. Lenna quietly picked up the cups, to wash them up. Trixie looked at the door, shaking.

"Well, that was fun," said Nix. "Do come back when you like."

There was a loud bang, and they looked round at Griggin, who had slammed his fist on the table.

"I am *tired* of this! These people. Do they think we *like* dealing with eldritch entities? Do they think we invite them for *coffee*? Mages! All the rules *they* are subject to, are simply the rules of the land. You shall not commit murder. You shall not steal. Do they even realise how many *more* laws we have? Do they know how tight a line we walk? I have tortured one of our own to death for having sex with one of his minions. Bumping into a Voidwalker by *accident* is an offence of the third order, with grave penalties. But they are ignorant of all this, and worse, they *refuse to be educated*. We have *hundreds* of rules beaten into us, specifying to the very last detail what we are, and are not allowed to do. And that is not because we are *good*, but because we know perfectly well how evil we can become, if we allow ourselves. One of *us*? Killing some poor defenceless Dwarf girl not even out of Warrior

school yet? Inconceivable!"

Griggin looked up, and the expression on his face was terrible to see.

"I will get to the bottom of this. I will find out who is responsible for the death of young Gemma Ironhand. And if I should find that Warlock magic is involved in some way, then I *will* see to it that that person is extinguished. So say I."

Trixie caught up with Richard on her way to school. He looked at her, and then in front of him, avoiding Trixie's eyes.

"Hey."

"Hiya."

Trixie looked at Richard's face. He looked unhappy, embarrassed to be here, ashamed. Trixie's stomach knotted up.

"Are you alright?"

"Father doesn't want me to talk to you," said Richard.

"Because *my* father is a Warlock?" Trixie's voice was small, fearful.

"He does not want me to associate with Warlock families," said Richard. "He's really serious about this."

Trixie said nothing, only looked. She wanted to swallow, but her mouth was dry. They walked on, into the corridor to the Military Quarter. Richard took a deep breath.

"I've *never* disobeyed my father," he said. "Since I turned twelve. Never."

Trixie shook. As though a switch was thrown, her face became angry and hard. She gave Richard one last look.

"Well goodbye, then," said Trixie, and turned round to walk off in another direction. Any direction.

She didn't get further than one step. Richard grabbed her shoulder, and spun her round. He took both her shoulders in his hands, pulled Trixie to him and kissed her. Trixie did nothing for a moment, then put her arms round his neck.

The world disappeared, as irrelevant.

Trixie looked into Richard's eyes.

"Well," she said, "at least you're not associating."

Richard laughed, louder than that joke justified, and held Trixie close to him.

"So. Why are you disobeying your father now?"

Righard sighed. "Because he's *wrong*. He's wrong about your father, and he's wrong about you. Your father is not someone who likes to see people suffer. He's *not* evil, and neither are you. You are... are..."

Trixie grinned. "Go on. Flattery will get you things."

Richard's eyes gleamed. "A hot chick?"

"Naturally." Trixie put her hand on Richard's cheek. "I thought you were going to drop me."

"Drop you? Were you my girlfriend, then?"

Trixie closed her eyes and leaned her head on Richard's shoulder.

"Yes. I just hadn't told myself yet."

Griggin sat on a sofa in a Dwarf house, in one of the better parts of Ironforge. The sofa was Dwarf size, of course, and his feet didn't reach the ground. The door opened, and a Dwarf came in. Instead of the usual plate armour, he was wearing a dark jacket over a white shirt, with a black tie.

"Good morning, Sir. I am Gryll Ironhand. I was told that you wanted to see me."

Griggin leapt down onto the floor, and bowed his head.

"Griggin Steambender, Sir. At your service and that of your family. I am here to investigate the murder of your daughter, on behalf of the Gnomeregan Warlock Circle in exile."

"Murder? We prefer to say that she fell in battle."

"Fell in battle. My apologies, Sir. My daughter Trixie knew your daughter. She thought highly of her."

Gryll Ironhand's tired eyes wrinkled. "Young Trixie. She was at the funeral. A delightful young lady. I wish I'd known her earlier."

"Thank you, Sir."

Mr. Ironhand pointed his hand at the sofa.

"Please sit down, Mr. Steambender, and tell me what you wish from me."

"Sir, it has been suggested to me that Warlock magic, or Demonic powers may have been used against Gemma. To be certain, I would have had to examine her, but I could not. Did you see her... before she was buried?"

Gryll Ironhand closed his eyes for a moment.

"Aye," he said. "I did. I laid out her body, took off her armour, and dressed her for the last time, like many times before, when she was a child. A father should not

survive his children, Mr. Steambender. It is against the order of things."

"I'm aware that this must be difficult for you, Mr. Ironhand," said Griggin. "But I need to know a few things, so that I can start searching in the right direction."

"Yer right, Mr. Steambender. It is difficult. I'll be fair with ye, I don't like Warlocks much. No Dwarf ever interfered in the business of creatures from unmentionable places. We don't have it in us. Only Humans and Gnomes, or filthy Blood-elves or Orcs or Undead do. I have faced all of them in my time, and brought them down with steel and Holy Light. And now they say some Mage or Warlock has burnt my own daughter to death, in the heart of our very own city." Gryll Ironhand looked into Griggin's eyes. "Ask what you will. If it helps ye to find the wretched creature who did this to my Gemma, then I'll suffer."

"Come on, Bieslook. We'll be late for class if you don't hurry."

Lenna picked Bieslook up, on her arm. Ye gods, she was getting *heavy*. Must stop feeding her. Right. Throw

Bies over the doorstep at the Library, then off to the shooting range. Griggin was in too foul a mood to live with today, so a bit of mindless violence was just what she needed.

"It's a *horse*! A horse on wheels! And it's only got two wheels. Why doesn't it fall over, Lenna?"

"Why don't we ask Mr. Karnik the historian? He's sure to know."

"Mr. Karnik only knows dead things," said Bieslook.

"A motorcycle *is* a dead thing."

"Oh. Didn't know."

Lenna stepped forward quickly. The horn for four o'clock hadn't sounded yet. There was still time. She entered the noisier part of Tinker Town, where all the cool Gnomes lived. As she passed it, a Human woman came out of the tunnel to the Deeprun Tram to Stormwind.

"Madam? Madam! Please, could you help me?"

Lenna put Bieslook down on the ground and turned to the woman.

"What appears to be the problem?"

"It's Timmy! Timmy has fallen in the tunnel, and I can't get him out!"

"Let's call the guard," said Lenna.

"No! No, *please!* They'll take him away from me!
Please help me!"

Lenna gave the woman a look. Humans were mad. Tall, thin, and utterly bonkers. But then again, who knew what was the matter. She opened her mouth to ask the woman what in Azeroth was going on.

"Lenna!"

In a flash, Lenna whirled round. As she was talking to the Human in front of her, another one of them had walked up behind her and grabbed Bieslook. She was kicking and struggling in the woman's grasp. Lenna raised her arm, hand glowing with fire. There were things you didn't *do* with a fire mage, and grabbing their children was definitely one of those things. There was a sudden line of fiery pain at her throat, and someone hissed in her ear.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. My friend can slit her throat before you can say 'Fwoosh'. Come with us, and nobody gets hurt."

Lenna looked over her shoulder at the woman.

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Well, if you don't come quietly, Gnomes will definitely get hurt. Into the tunnel. Leg it, shrimp."

Lenna looked at Bieslook. "Easy, Bies, easy. Don't struggle. We're going for a little walk in the tunnel."

"Yes Lenna. Are they friends?"

The woman holding Bieslook laughed. "Of course we are, poppet. You do know what a poppet is, don't you, Mrs. Steambender? Come quietly or we'll know if you scream when I prick her.

The Humans pushed Lenna into the Deeprun tram station, and down into the tunnel.

"Careful, Mrs. Steambender," said one of the women. "It's awfully dark here."

"I can make some light if you want," said Lenna.

"Tut tut. Remember. Poppet. Pins and needles."

Lenna said nothing.

"Left here."

Lenna walked into a side tunnel, and choked.

"Ugh! What's that *smell?*"

One of the Human women laughed.

"You'd better get used to it, little woman. Soon, you will smell like that."

There was a sudden bang, and a stab of pain in Lenna's head. She fell to her knees, onto her face, and knew no more.

When the Deeprun Tram was constructed, the greatest task was to drill two tunnels, through the hard rock of Azeroth. The Dwarves accomplished this great feat using large mechanical tunnel borers, that worked their way, slowly, through the rock as a worm digs through the earth. When the final bit of rock had been crushed, rather than disassemble the borer, they had backed it up a few hundred yards, turned it sideways, and left it there, its diamond-tipped teeth all but worn away, its engines beyond salvaging, the metal it was made out of less than the cost of salvaging it. The engineers had shut off the engine, patted the controls, closed the door and walked through their tunnel, to Ironforge.

This was the place where Lenna came to herself, cold, head aching, feeling empty. Her arms were raised above her head. Her feet only just touched the ground. She opened her eyes, to the dim light of a candle. She tried to turn her head away, but the feeling of emptiness continued. She looked up. Three women,

one Gnome, two Humans, were casting some spell on her. Blue spirals of light flowed from her, into the women's outstretched hands. They were draining her mana, keeping her helpless, unable to cast her fire spells. A Gnome man walked forward, into the light. His hand was on Bieslook's shoulder, and a staff was in his other hand. Lenna thought she could see other figures moving in the darkness. Someone was hanging next to her, tied up as she was. It was a Dwarf woman. Her dead body hung very still, not even swinging back and forth. The flesh on her left hand and arm had been burnt away, and long, thin gashes ran parallel on her naked body. Lenna turned her head away, and tried not to be sick. The Gnome man grinned, and gently ran his fingers through Bieslook's hair.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Steambender. Welcome to my humble abode. Your husband may have mentioned me, though perhaps he has not seen fit to mention my name. I am Bezoar, Warlock of the Inner Circle."

Nix sat at home, at the table. A plan of the Throne Room of Ironforge lay in front of him on the table, and he was marking out hiding places on it, from his notebook, when there was a knock on the door. Nix

looked up.

"What is the meaning of this interruption," he intoned, and walked to the door. On the doorstep stood a Human woman, wearing black leather armour. She was smiling at him. As she saw him, she licked her lips.

"Hello. Are you in the house?"

Nix looked up at her. "*Raven?* What are you doing here?"

Raven stepped forward, and sighed happily.

"I'm in the house," she said. "You're in the house. Who else is in the house?"

"Um," said Nix.

"We're all in the house," said Raven. "I *love* to be in the house." She bared her teeth in a wicked grin.

"Master says everybody in the house should *die!*"

With predator-like speed, Raven drew her daggers and stabbed the space where Nix was but a splintered second ago.

"Come to me," said Raven. "You'll be in the house forever!"

Somebody hit her head, from behind, very hard.

"Ow. Ow, ow!"

"Pain is good," said Nix. "Pain means you're alive."

"Nix?"

Nix raised an eyebrow. "Raven?"

"How the hell did you get here?"

"I live here. You pointed sharp things at me. Why?"

"Oh come on. I wouldn't..." Raven looked at Nix' face.

Only now, she noticed that her arms were cuffed behind her back, and round a piece of Steambender Manor infrastructure.

"Oh yes, you would. Well, try at least. Fat chance long-legs. What made you do it?"

"I..." Raven faltered.

Nix scowled at her. "Go on. Say you don't remember. See where that gets you."

"I... don't. Please believe me."

"Hmmm. What's the last thing you do remember?"

Raven closed her eyes a moment. "I was... walking. Walking in... the Gnome place. With all the noise."

"Tinker town," said Nix.

"Yeah. And then I thought I saw something moving, gleaming, on the floor. I think it was a silver piece or something like that. So I picked it up, and there was another one just a bit further, so I picked that up as

well."

"And you didn't think that was a bit, shall we say, odd?"

"Sure. But a piece of silver is a piece of silver, isn't it?"

"I suppose. Then what?"

"Well, then I walked on a bit, and there was *another* silver piece. So I bent down to pick it up, and there was this... this..."

Nix raised his eyebrows. Raven had closed her eyes, and was licking her lips, breathing hard. Nix slapped her face. Raven looked up, startled.

"Hey!"

"What happened *after* that, Raven? Stop pissing about."

"*Master* came," said Raven. "And I had to go to the house, and *kill* everybody inside." She screwed her eyes shut, shook her head. "And the idea of killing felt... felt like the *best* thing I could ever do. Even better than..."

"Yeah, yeah," said Nix. "Tunnel to the Deeprun Tram, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Right. Think I'll go there and take a look. See what's up."

"Hey! Aren't you going to let me go? We could go there *forever*. I want to have a word with the bastard who mind-controlled me."

"Nope," said Nix. "For all I know, you're still under mind control. I'm not about to have you start stabbing me at an inconvenient time. Sit tight, and enjoy your headache."

Nix went to his bed, pulled on his leather armour. Then, he opened his weapons box and took out all his favourite daggers and other instruments for ruining someone's day. He waved at Raven, and closed the door behind him.

"Crap," said Raven.

"Impossible!"

Griggin frowned. "Paladin Gryll Ironhand described it to me perfectly clearly. Extensive burn wounds over the poor woman's whole body, and a purple discolouration of the flesh. I don't have to tell you what can cause *that*."

Briarthorn raised his arms. "Nobody, *nobody* in my Circle would be so mad as to attack citizens of Ironforge. It is not done."

"Well, somebody did, and that somebody was using Demonic magic to do it."

"I don't believe it. There must be some other explanation. I will assign some of my investigators immediately, to investigate the matter. Surely, that Dwarf mis-read the signs. We must get the truth from him, and put his mind at rest. Warlocks were not involved in this."

Griggin grabbed Acting Grand Master Briarthorn by the collar of his robes.

"Gryll Ironhand is a grieving father, who did me the great honour of answering my questions. I will *not* have a bunch of interfering Warlocks try and talk to him, simply to soothe your conscience. Gemma Ironhand was killed using Warlock magic. There is no doubt in my mind."

"Well then, *you* find out what's going on."

"I will, believe me."

Lenna pulled at the ropes holding her to the ceiling, but succeeded in doing little more than pull herself up. The draining blue beams of sickly light didn't waver. Occasionally, one of them would stop, only to start again a few moments later. Lenna felt like she was slowly suffocating. The stench was horrible.

"Mrs. Steambender, I apologise for the inconvenience. It's just that I have a healthy respect for the efficacy of your fire magic, and no wish to be its target."

"Bezoar, why are you doing this?"

Bezoar thought for a moment.

"Do you realise, Mrs. Steambender, what it is like to be possessed by Daemons? No longer to be in control of your very thoughts?"

Lenna made herself concentrate. She raised her head, and looked into Bezoar's eyes.

"No. Griggin doesn't talk about it."

"Warlock Griggin has no idea. The attacks on his mind were weak enough for him to resist. Insignificant. I had to claw myself back from the very abyss!"

"Griggin... is stronger than you."

Bezoar shook with anger. He pointed his hand at Lenna, and concentrated. A green stream of light, much like the women's, struck Lenna's chest. Lenna choked. She bit down, not wanting to show the pain to Bieslook.

"Warlock Griggin," said Bezoar, pronouncing the words very clearly, "Has all the things that I could have had if only he had taught me the *right* way to keep the Daemons at bay. A family. Children to care for him in his old age. Riches. I had to teach myself! And now, I am... damaged. But soon, it is *he* who will be damaged, and I who will have everything."

Lenna closed her eyes, as Bezoar's spell completed, and the pain subsided. She hung her head, said nothing.

"Your son is already dead. I, shall we say, persuaded, one of his class mates to kill everyone in your house."

"Nix..."

"I will find a suitable death for your daughter as well, Mrs. Steambender. Perhaps her fate will be like that of her class-mate, the Dwarfess. She begged for a quick death. How much pain can your daughter stand, Mrs. Steambender? You'll never know. But I will."

"Griggin is... on to you. He will find this place."

"I daresay he will, Mrs. Steambender. And he will find what's left of you. He will be able to read your every scream of pain in the wounds on your body. And then, he too will die."

Lenna raised her head, hardly able to keep her eyes open.

"Please. The little one. Does she have to see this? Let her go."

Bezoar laughed out loud. He looked at Lenna with cruel delight.

"I think the little one has outlived her usefulness." Bezoar turned to the group of women. "Which one of you wishes to take care of this little girl?"

One of the women stepped forward, the one who had brought Bieslook here. She walked up to Bezoar, eyes glowing, a parody of a smile on her face.

"I will." The woman looked at Lenna. "Quick, or... slow?"

"You choose," said Bezoar. He turned to Lenna, pointing at the poor Dwarf woman's arm. "She did that. The only time I couldn't keep her from fainting."

Lenna screamed. "Troggs! You're all Troggs! You will all burn! Bieslook! Tell Griggin! They are like Troggs! Tell Griggin! Emergency! Emergency!"

The woman laughed. "Oh, I was going to do it quickly. But now, just for that, I'll make sure you can hear just when she dies."

She picked Bieslook up by the back of her dress, and carried her to the door. She held the small girl up, facing Lenna.

"Say goodbye to Mummy, little girl."

The woman disappeared out of the door. A few moments later, they could hear Bieslook scream. The unworldly noise of magical fire filled the tunnel, echoing up and down. There was a sickening smell of burning flesh, perversely reminding Lenna of boar ribs, roasting under the grill. She sagged in her ropes, body shaking in sobs.

Bezoar turned round to Lenna. He put his hand under her chin and made her look up at him. His eyes glowed with pleasure.

"There. Now, your little one will not have to witness your suffering. A kindness not to be underestimated."

He looked at Lenna's face.

She was not crying.

She was laughing.

"The situation amuses you? Oh, please don't tell me you have gone insane already."

Lenna laughed again.

"Why should I be upset?"

The door opened, and silhouetted in the doorway was a creature that might once have been Human. She no longer had hair, no longer had clothes, no face, no eyes. One of her arms was burnt till only bones remained. The other felt blindly ahead of her as she staggered into the room. The creature took one breath, and its broken voice uttered one single word, almost impossible to make out.

"Mas-ter."

The body fell to the ground, and silence was complete. Even the noise of the mana-draining spells stopped.

"O dear," said Lenna.

Bezoar shook himself.

"You. You. Keep this woman's mana pool empty. The rest of you, get her, and *kill* her. Do it *now!*"

File GSB-077: Daemonology

Trixie and Richard walked side by side, faces glowing, unable to keep from grinning whenever they looked at each other. They had tried holding hands, but after a dozen or so steps, Trixie had bumped Richard with her hip and sent him flying into a door. Richard had grabbed Trixie's wrists, pinned her against the wall and kissed her. This had taken some time. So now, they simply walked along, feet never touching the ground. They weren't sure where they were going, and they weren't in any hurry to get there anyway. The Forlorn Pool seemed like a nice place to wait a bit. Spend some time together. Kiss like their lives depended on it.

Trixie stopped, and stared. As they walked into the tunnel to Tinker Town, she spotted a small, small Gnome girl, sprinting at full throttle the other way.

"Bies! Bieslook!"

Bieslook saw Trixie, and leaped at her, wrapping her arms round Trixie.

"Big Sis! They're hurting Lenna! In the tunnel! I shot fire! It was an Emergery! I was scared and I fwooshed

her! Must find Griggin!"

"Easy, Little Sis. What's going on?"

"They have Lenna! In the tunnel!" Bieslook looked into Trixie's eyes, tears streaming down her face, shaking. "They have empty eyes! They are hurting Lenna! Must find Griggin!"

"Mum? Somebody has Mum? Who?"

"Tall women, and one man. Bezwar. Must find Griggin! They are hurting her."

Trixie took Bieslook's face between her hands, and smiled at her.

"I'll go and get Mum. Richard will help me, won't you?"

Richard simply nodded. Trixie looked back at Bieslook.

"Can you find your way home? Nix will be home, and maybe Dad as well."

Bieslook drew her sleeve across her face, and sniffed.

"Yes."

"When you do, tell them we're going into the tunnel to find Lenna."

"Alrighty then," said Bieslook.

"Well, off you go."

Trixie watched Bieslook run off towards the Military Ward. She raised her hand and loosened her sword in its sheath.

"How do you feel about dark places full of nasty people?"

"I *live* for dark places and nasty people," said Richard.

They ran to Tinker Town, and into the Deeprun tram tunnel.

Griggin came home, and opened his door, grumbling to himself. Part of him was raving at his fellow Warlocks, who would not take responsibility for the one thing they were perfectly suited to. Part of him was angry with himself, for his lateness in investigating the matters further. Another part of him was angry because he honestly didn't know where to start looking. There were various detection spells he could use, but those required some idea of what you were looking for, and Griggin hadn't any. He closed the door, hung up his cloak and walked into the room. He stopped dead.

There was a Human woman sitting on the floor, arms behind her back. On the table were two sharp daggers that didn't belong to Nix. The woman looked up to him. He looked down on the woman. She gave him a wavering smile.

"Hi!"

"Good afternoon, Ma'am. Griggin Steambender at your service. Who are you?"

"They call me... Raven."

"Miss Raven. Welcome. What are you doing here?"

"Um," said Raven. This was Nix' dad. Simply telling him that she'd wanted to kill his only son didn't look like it would help. "It's complicated," she said.

"You appear to be hand-cuffed to the heater. Why is this?"

"Would you believe it's one of my turn-ons?"

"No."

Raven sighed. Nothing for it. Maybe the truth *would* set her free. Stranger things had happened.

"Someone mind-controlled me, and sent me here to kill whoever was inside."

Griggin nodded, a little grin on his face. Just when you think there's no way forward, opportunities are

dropped right in your lap.

"Well, from your current situation, I deduce that you were not successful. I hope nobody was hurt?"

"Nix knocked me on my head from behind," said Raven, scowling. "Before I could stick him."

"Excellent, excellent. Now *who* mind-controlled you?"

Raven bit back an urge to say '*Master* did,' and closed her eyes a moment.

"I don't know him. A Gnome. Some sort of wizard, or sorcerer."

"Hmm..." Griggin scratched his cheek, thinking.

"Mages don't go in for mind control much. They control people by manipulating physical entities. A Shadow priest can use mind control, though they have to concentrate while they control their targets. You cannot run two bodies on one brain. What did it feel like?"

"Umm..."

Griggin walked up to Raven, to look at her. He gently held her chin, and put his hand over one of her eyes. Griggin waited a moment, then took his hand away. Raven's pupils contracted normally, responding to the light.

"Doesn't look like they used any chemical control substances or mind poisons. Did he give you anything to drink, perhaps?"

"No. I didn't even see him do it. I just... wanted to, *had* to do, whatever he told me." Raven looked at Griggin, her grey eyes large, shining with tears held back. "I'd *never* hurt Nix, *never*. He is my only friend at school, the only one who'll talk to me."

"Good," said Griggin. "Everybody needs a friend. Now about the mind control. Were you sexually aroused, by any chance?"

The gushing expression left Raven's face as quick as lightning. Anger flared.

"That is none of your damn business."

Griggin frowned, and crossed his arms.

"Miss Raven. I do not ask you these questions to embarrass or humiliate you, but because I need the answers, to determine what sort of controlling technique was used against you. My family may be in danger, and I *will* get these answers from you. I would prefer not having to force from you whether you felt a bit hot below the belt."

Raven stared at Griggin, and the blood seemed to drain from her face. This might be one of those funny

little Gnomes, but she was helpless. Her own daggers were lying on the table.

Griggin sighed, and the tension seemed to flow out of the room.

"There is a school of suggestion used by the Sayaad, that relies on the victim's sex drive. It is extremely powerful, relatively easy to apply, and difficult to defend against. I would like to confirm or rule out its use. Please, Miss Raven. Were you?"

Raven looked at Griggin, turned her eyes to the floor. She nodded, quietly.

"Did you try to resist the suggestions?"

Raven shook her head. "No. I couldn't. Or, more like I didn't even think of resisting. I felt so..."

Griggin put his hand on Raven's shoulder.

"Where did this happen?"

"Tinker town. Deeprun tunnel. I told Nix. He's gone out there. He left me here because he thought I'd attack him."

"Thank you, Miss Raven. I'll go there now. Thank you for your help."

Griggin thought a moment, then grabbed his Warlock's robes and staff. He opened a box and took

out his small supply of soulshards. No time for half-measures.

"Um," said Raven. "Aren't you going to uncuff me?"

"I'm afraid not. Nix was right. You may seem in control now, but the possibility of a relapse is far from imaginary. Don't worry, Miss Raven. The effects will have worn off by tomorrow. Until then, enjoy the hospitality of Steambender Manor."

The door closed behind Griggin. Raven's nose started to itch, and she tried rubbing it against her shoulder. She couldn't reach. Damn.

"Bloody Gnomes," she said.

Richard walked into the tunnel, shield and mace out, with his eyes trying to pierce the darkness ahead. Trixie walked close behind, two-handed sword raised next to her shoulder.

"Can't see a damn thing," said Richard. "Do you think we have the right tunnel?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Should have asked Bies."

"Bieslook did well, getting out of here alive."

"Yeah. There's only one thing she can do, but by the Titans, does she pack a punch. She shouldn't, though.

It's too taxing for a little girl. Gives her headaches. I'm going to find the buggers who scared her, and beat them into a bloody pulp."

"Oooh, I *love* it when you're bloodthirsty."

"You'd love it if I wanted to play fluffy bunnies with them."

"Hmmm. Bunnies. You know what *they* think of all the time."

Trixie chuckled.

"Yeah. Grass."

The darkness was split by a sick, purple light, and Richard could only just duck behind his shield. A bit further on in the tunnel, he could see the tall, thin figure of a Human woman wearing robes. Richard yelled, and charged forward. Just before his mace could swing round, the woman disappeared into nothing. Another bolt of energy hit him from behind, burning him. Trixie cried out, and came rushing towards him, sword out. A Gnome woman had waited for Richard to charge in, and was now attacking him from behind. Trixie's two-hander sliced round to turn her into two Halflings, but she disappeared. Trixie walked up to Richard, and stood back to back with him, looking round.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. Got hit, but not too bad." Richard's breath was quick. "I think we got the right tunnel."

"Do you think these bitches got Gemma?"

"Could be. Seem to have gone."

"Probably hiding somewhere, waiting for another shot."

Richard grunted. "Forward or back?"

"Forward. They've got Mum."

"Right. Stay close."

"Like I wouldn't."

Nix ran into Bieslook by the lava pool of the Great Forge. She'd taken a wrong turn by the Military Ward, and was looking round, dazed and confused.

"Whoa there! Where are you going?"

"Nix! You're not deaded! They said you were dead!"

Nix grinned at Bieslook. "Well, they were wrong then, weren't they? Who?"

"The women and the Bezwar in the tunnel! Must find Griggin! They are hurting Lenna!"

"*Mum?* Bies, where?"

"In the tunnel. Timmy had fallen in the tunnel, and we all went and they *hit* Lenna and tied her up. Trixie and Richard went to get her."

"*Richard?*"

"Yes, Richard. He was helping Trixie."

"I bet he was," said Nix. "Bies, do you know how to get home?"

"No," said Bieslook, lips trembling. "Ask a guard."

"Right." Nix pointed. "See that tunnel? That goes to the Commons. You can find your way from there, can't you? The fruit stalls? The bank?"

Bieslook nodded.

"Good. Go home, and wait for Dad. Tell him what you told me."

Bieslook nodded, and ran to the tunnel. Nix watched her go, then turned his eyes back. So somebody had his Mum. Tied up. Just what the hell anybody thought they were doing, Nix didn't know. But he was certainly not going to let them get away with it. He set off at a sprint to Tinker Town.

Nix walked into the Deeprun Tram just as one of the trains rolled into the station. People came out and

walked straight past him, to the exit. He looked at the carriages, neatly suspended on rollers from overhead beams. Nix had heard that the tram was powered by massive steam engines somewhere in the middle of the tunnel. Nice. He looked to his right. There were two tunnels. Hmm... Which one?

"Eeny meenie minie moe," said Nix. He grinned. Trixie, even now when she should know better, used that rhyme to decide which one to pick. He'd astounded her when they were both younger by being able to predict which one it would be even before she stopped, through the dark and arcane art of realising that the number of counts in the rhyme was always the same. And if you had two things from which to pick, you'd get the one you *didn't* start with. Nix looked round to see if nobody was watching him, then sneaked into the right-hand tunnel.

It didn't take a long time running through the dark tunnel to find trouble. A strange luminous green circle was on the ground, with another circle a few yards above it. Mystic runes revolved lazily along its edge. A bit further on, Nix could see Trixie running towards a Gnome, who laughed and disappeared just before Trixie's sword could hit her. A Human woman started

shooting at Trixie from another place, and Trixie had to run again.

As Nix watched, the green circle glowed more brightly, and the Gnome girl appeared in front of his very eyes. Nix didn't hesitate a moment. He drew a dagger, slid behind the girl, clapped his hand over her eyes and pushed his dagger into her back. The girl made a small noise of pain and surprise. Nix twisted the dagger, pulled it out. The body slumped to the floor. That left two Human women, one of whom was now shooting at Trixie's back. Richard was lying on the ground, moving feebly, trying to get up.

Nix put away his dagger and grabbed one of his throwing spikes. Taking careful aim, he threw the spike at the woman farthest away from him, and hit her leg. The woman's mouth and eyes opened wide, looking at the spike in her leg. She grabbed it, and pulled it out. The poison started to work. The woman clutched her leg, *screamed*, fell to the floor, and rolled round. Her face showed nothing but searing, burning pain. The woman closest to Nix shrunk back, startled. Nix leapt onto her back and hit her behind her ear with the butt-end of his dagger. She fell flat on her face, with Nix on her back. Nix put his dagger to her throat.

Trixie rushed towards the woman who was still rolling round on the floor in agony. She raised her sword to finish her off. Nix shouted.

"Wait!"

Trixie looked round.

"Nix?"

"Wait."

Nix turned to the woman underneath him, pressing his dagger against her throat. He grabbed her by the hair and forced her head up, making her look at her fellow Warlock.

"Where is our mum."

The woman beneath him said nothing. Nix pushed her face into the ground, and lifted her up again.

"Where have you taken our mum?"

"Piss... on you, shrimp."

Nix bent over, to whisper into the woman's ear.

"Look at your friend. Listen to her. Have you ever heard her like that before?"

Trixie looked at the woman at her feet. Both her arms were round her leg, her eyes were closed tight, and blood ran from her lip where she'd bitten it. The woman screamed again. Trixie looked at her brother.

"Nix..."

"Shut up!" Nix turned to the woman again. "Now in about ten minutes or so, she'll stop. That's when her vocal cords give out, and she can't make another sound. By then, the poison will have spread from her leg to all over her body. She won't faint, she'll just lie there burning, can't scream, only croak, can't move, burning, burning..."

"Please! Make it stop!"

"Where is our mother."

"No! Please!"

"We can make it stop. Tell us where she is. Listen to her. She's already starting to lose her voice. Where is our mother."

"In the *tunnel!* Further in the tunnel! There's a side tunnel to the right! *Please!*"

"Who is there? How many?"

"*Master*, and two... more. *Please*, make it stop!"

Nix looked up at Trixie. "Do it!"

Trixie stared at Nix. She turned her sword round in her hands, raised it, then stepped on the woman's arm to keep her steady. Not looking into the woman's eyes, she stabbed down, hitting just below the left breast.

The screaming stopped abruptly. The body twitched once, then lay still. The woman in Nix' grip struggled underneath him.

"No!"

With one vicious slash, Nix sliced her throat, pushed her face down in the sand till the body stopped moving under him. He looked up at Trixie, showing his teeth, growling.

"Let's go."

"Watch out!" Richard shouted. Nix wasted no time looking round, but dropped flat onto his stomach. A shadowy bolt of light passed over him and smashed into Richard's shield arm. Nix rolled over, reaching for another dart, but Trixie was quicker. She threw her sword at the last of the women, hitting her square in the chest. The Human woman stared in horror at Trixie's sword sticking out of her, then fell. Trixie walked over, put her foot on the corpse and pulled her sword out. She looked at Nix.

"Dammit Nix..."

"What?"

"I'd never have thought you could do that."

"Do what?"

"Be as nasty as that."

"They're probably working on Mum as we speak. Want me to ask her nicely?"

Trixie wiped and sheathed her sword.

"Just don't start enjoying it."

Richard came over, and wrapped his good arm round her. Nix looked on with his mouth open.

"What are *you* doing?"

Richard looked round.

"I'm snogging your sister."

"Right," said Nix. "Right. Um. How's your arm?"

"Hurting like buggery. Ye gods, you *are* one for the hard questions, aren't you?"

Nix sneered, reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of cloth.

"Want some bandages for that?"

"Yes!"

"Gimme that," said Trixie. She took Richard's hand, laid it on her shoulder and started to wind Mageweave round and round his arm, looking deep into his eyes.

"Hurry up, will you?" said Nix.

Trixie's eyes never wavered from Richard's.

"Bro? Shut up."

The entrance to Bezoar's hideout was exactly where they'd expected it. Dim lights came from within. Happily, nobody seemed to be screaming in agony inside.

"Right," said Richard. "Three clothies to deal with."

"Plus what they manage to conjure up," said Trixie. "That'll take them a while, though."

"Keep it down, you two," said Nix. "I'll go and investigate. You wait here."

"Yes, O mighty leader," said Trixie.

"Oh alright," said Nix. "You be the leader. What do we do?"

Trixie looked at Nix through narrow eyes. "Why don't you go and investigate, while we wait here?"

"Excellent idea. Couldn't have thought of a better one myself."

"Pff."

Nix disappeared in the gloom. This was the kind of place where rogues could really shine, well, *not* shine. Carefully keeping his breathing under control, Nix sneaked into the disused digger. There were, as expected, three robed figures present. And at the back,

hanging from ropes, were two women. One Dwarf, clearly dead, and... Nix shivered. The two women were casting some kind of spell on his mother, who hung in the ropes, while some nasty git talked to her.

"I can get *any* girl, Mrs. Steambender. When that little girl is dead, and my underlings come back, I will make you want me. Want me more than anything else in the world. And then, we'll hurt you, but still you will want me."

Nix had heard enough. He turned round and returned to Richard and Trixie.

"Listen up. Mum is hanging from ropes at the back of the room. I need you two to distract them, and I'll get Mum loose." Nix' voice wavered. "She looks in a bad way, but I don't think they started the real work yet."

Richard gave Nix a grim look. "I suppose by 'distract' you mean 'kill', right?"

"As long as they're not looking at Mum."

"Right. We can do that."

Nix hid himself once more, and this time, he sneaked past the clothies, till he ended up behind his mother. Nobody noticed him, intent as they were on Lenna. Lenna simply hung in her ropes, not answering, swinging back and forth. Just a few more seconds...

There was a mighty bang at the door, and Trixie and Richard came storming in. Bezoar looked round. He raised his fist, and shouted. A ring of dark purple light surrounded him, and knocked Trixie and Richard back. The energy hit Nix, and he almost fainted, reeling. Lenna gasped, and struggled feebly against her ropes.

"Daemons out!"

Three pairs of arms were lifted up at the same time, and magic started to flow. Moments later, three massive blue creatures filled up the small space, and started to pound on Trixie and Richard. They had the excellent sense to run outside, taking the Warlocks and their Voidwalkers with them.

Nix drew his dagger, and cut Lenna's ropes, catching her so she wouldn't fall to the ground. She shook her head, and looked up blearily.

"Nix?"

"Hi Mum."

"They said you were dead."

"Only from the neck up, Mum. Can you walk?"

"Just moment. Get my kit."

Back in the Gnomeregan school of magic, there had been lessons in how to change your armour, well

robes, quickly. Ways of folding. Ways to get in and out of your clothes efficiently. That way, you could change from one set of enchantments to another in mid-fight. While Lenna could understand perfectly why you'd want to get *out* of your clothes quickly, putting them on quickly had seemed a bit useless to her at the time. Now, she thanked the teacher for her lessons. In record time, Lenna pulled on her magically enchanted robes, legs, shoulders, bracers. She picked up her staff, then made a frustrated noise. Those face-melting bitches had drained her completely. Lenna closed her eyes, concentrated. A blue-hued whirlwind formed round her, gathering mana from a large area around, channeling it into her own reserves. She completed her spell. It'd have to do. They ran out. Nix ran straight at one of the blue giants, stabbing with his daggers, but it was quite clear that they were overmatched. Trixie and Richard were fighting back to back, striking out at the Daemons as they bore down on them.

Lenna raised herself to her full height, planting her feet firmly apart. She raised her staff, and concentrated. From her outstretched hand, a ball of fire spat out, straight at the closest of the Warlock women. The Human's head was engulfed in flame, then her

whole body. She didn't even have time to scream. As she died, her Voidwalker, free of her dominion, faded and disappeared. Lenna frowned in concentration, then shot from her fingers a barrage of silvery missiles at the second Warlock woman. Each of them hit home. She died on her feet. Bezoar yelled at his Daemon, and the last of the blue creatures glided towards Lenna, fists raised to crush this meddling creature. Lenna fired at it. At the same time, Richard, Trixie and Nix leaped on it, slashing, stabbing, beating. It raised its arms in the air, gave a shivering cry and disappeared, leaving only its arm bracers lying on the ground. They looked round for Bezoar, who was nowhere to be seen. Lenna thought she heard running feet further down the tunnel.

"Right. Time to stop pissing about," said Lenna. She gathered up all that was left of her magical energy, compressed it into a single ball of fire, and let rip. The tunnel in the direction of Stormwind turned into one roaring, crackling mass of flame. The wall of fire moved out, faster than anyone could run or even ride, all over the tunnel. Lenna shook her fist at the darkness.

"And *stay* dead!"

Lenna lowered her staff, and leaned on it, breathing hard. She looked round at her children. Nix. Trixie.

Richard. She grinned.

"Of course, if he ran the *other* way, I'll look like a complete noob. How is everyone?"

"I'm good," said Trixie.

"Me too," said Richard. "Plate armour *good*."

"I'm fine," said Nix. "Are you alright?"

Lenna dropped her staff, clattering on the floor, and tried to hug the three others at the same time.

"How's Bieslook?"

"Sent her home," said Nix. She should be there, waiting for Dad.

Lenna closed her eyes. "Light be thanked."

Richard coughed. "I think we need to get after that last Warlock. Those guys are never as dead as they seem to be."

"No."

Everybody looked round. Dimly visible in the low light of the tunnel was Griggin. Lenna said nothing, stepped over to him, wrapped her arms round her husband and kissed him. Nix, Richard and Trixie looked at each other while this was going on.

"Yeah," said Nix. "So. Anyway. Do we let this bastard run all the way to Stormwind?"

"I won't," said Griggin. "This is my job. This is Warlock business. I'll probably need to use my less discriminatory attacks to defeat him, so this is one fight that I will have to win alone."

"Dad!" Trixie looked at her father. "We just cleared out a whole nest of them. Surely, we can take on one more?"

"No. You stay back. I do not want to worry about you getting hurt. Do not follow me." Griggin looked into Lenna's eyes. "I mean it."

Lenna looked at Griggin, nodded.

"I still don't like it."

"Neither do I, but so must it be."

Griggin ran into the tunnel without another word.

Bieslook finally reached home. She opened the letterbox, pulled at the bit of string behind it that opened the door, and went in. She took off her cloak and hung it on the peg.

"Griggin?"

No answer.

"Griggin," she called out again.

"He isn't here, kid," said Raven.

"Hello. Who are you?"

"I'm Raven. Who are you?"

"Bieslook Sparkmantle, at your service. Do you know where Griggin is? I have to find him."

"He's gone to the Deeprun Tram tunnel, kid. Important business. Scary business."

"Oh."

Bieslook looked at Raven. Raven radiated kindness and friendship. She was the most trustworthy soul in this entire house.

"Could you please open these handcuffs for me, little one?"

"Don't know how. Must find Griggin. Byebye!"

Bieslook turned round to leave. Raven shouted.

"Whoa! Don't do that, kid. It's dangerous there. Stay here, where it's safe. Your dad will come back."

"He's not my dad," said Bieslook. "Papa went away."

Raven looked at the young girl, and knew what she meant.

"Aww. I'm sorry, kid. I lost my father, too."

Bieslook looked deep into Raven's eyes. Then, she walked up to her and put her hand on her thigh.

"He wants you to be alive and happy."

"I doubt it," said Raven, "But thanks."

Bieslook went to the kitchen, pulled up a chair and climbed onto the sink. Standing up, she opened the top cupboard. She stood on her toes and could just reach the metal biscuit tin. Being careful not to drop it, she clambered down and opened it. She held out a biscuit to Raven.

"Have a biscuit. I can't do you chocolate, because I'm not allowed to boil the water. It's hot hot hot."

Raven looked at the small girl, then nodded at her bound hands.

"Can't reach, kid."

Bieslook held the biscuit up to her mouth. Raven laughed, took it between her teeth. Bieslook had one as well.

"Thanks," said Raven. "You'll make a fine Rogue some day."

"I'm going to be a Mage, almost as good as Papa," said Bieslook.

Raven laughed, and leaned her head back.

"I'm sure you will, kid. I'm sure you will."

Griggin caught up with Bezoar, as they came to a section of the tunnel where the roof had been cut away. The glass roof allowed the passengers of the tram to see an underground lake. Griggin had no eyes for the water landscape. Bezoar turned round. His robe was half burnt. So was his face, and his hair.

"Good afternoon, Bezoar," said Griggin. "I see you've met my family."

Bezoar grinned. "They are dead. My lovely assistants burnt them to a crisp. Your wife died begging for me to take her."

"Amazing," said Griggin. "I was just talking to them not twenty minutes ago. I must have very vivid hallucinations."

"Well, now you have found me, Master. Are you prepared to die?"

Griggin's gaze didn't waver as he looked into Bezoar's eyes.

"Yes. Are you?"

Bezoar laughed. "You fool. Do you think I still use the feeble techniques that you have taught me? You were only seeking to keep me weak, keep me from realising my full potential. But now, I wield the full power of the Daemon Neera. You haven't got a chance. Rest

assured, that after you die, I will return for your family, and their deaths will be slow and agonising."

"You have given yourself to the Daemon," said Griggin.

"I allowed the Daemon to meld her mind with mine, and as a result, we are both stronger."

"Her." Griggin smiled. "I was wondering about that. You have fallen to the charms of a Succubus, haven't you?"

"I have not," said Bezoar. "She offered me her body, her mind, her powers. I accepted them. I offered her my mind, my body, and she accepted them. I have ascended. Where you treat your Daemons as your slaves, Neera and I have become one. I will become more powerful than you could ever imagine."

"My dear boy," said Griggin. "You have abused the powers you were given. You have committed murder, and corrupted the souls of others to do so. And I have found you. Do you honestly think that you will live to see another sunrise?"

"Well, let's see, shall we? Prepare to meet Neera."

"O dear," said Griggin. "A succubus. Whatever will I do?"

Bezoar raised his hands, and lights started to rise from his upturned palms. Griggin waited. From out of thin air, the voluptuous body of the Daemon appeared. It was somewhat larger than usual. Its eyes burnt with a cold, cruel, white light. Griggin gasped. Old memories came to him. Memories of pain. Screams. The smell of scorched flesh. Blood. Darkness. He shook.

"I know you."

"And I know you, Warlock. You were the one that gave me that delicious spectacle back in Gnomeregan." The Daemon licked its lips. "And now, I will feast on you. Do I guess rightly that my flesh-puppet is your very own student? Oh, the irony."

"That is not irony," said Griggin, getting a grip on himself.

"You may be right," said the Daemon. "I am no expert on the things you mortals do to amuse yourself. Except one. I find the things that cause you pain and grief much more rewarding."

Bezoar looked up at his minion, or mistress, or both. Then, he grinned at Griggin.

"Well, master. I have shown you my weapon of choice. Aren't *you* going to summon a minion?"

Griggin took a deep breath.

"No. I will fight you myself "

"As you wish. Neera, kill him. Make it hurt. Make it last."

Griggin frowned. His skin glowed with fel energy. Neera's whip struck out, and struck home. Griggin's shadow ward took the damage. Griggin shouted. He raised his hands, and the image of a Daemon's skull appeared above his head. It belched purple fire at Bezoar and his Daemon. Griggin watched it eat into their skins. Bezoar grunted, then raised himself.

"Is that the best you can do, Master?"

Bezoar's hand shot forward, and a bolt of shadow hit Griggin in the chest, absorbed by his ward. Neera's whip lashed out again. Griggin set his jaw. The ward wouldn't last much longer.

"Give it up. Your death cannot be averted. Stop resisting, and I'll make it a quick one."

Griggin shook. He concentrated, and cast another spell of warding. An expensive one, but one that gave him more power to strike out. More shadow bolts struck him. He knew what he had to do. He must banish the Daemon, kill his student. Griggin had failed him, allowing Bezoar to become trapped by the Succubus' seductions. He looked into Bezoar's eyes. They

seemed to be glowing with an inner fire, hate, passion. He would go on to hurt, kill, torture if Griggin allowed him to live, and still, it was *his* fault that things had come to this pass. He was a seasoned Warlock, an experienced mentor of the young and impressionable. Had he the *right*?

More attacks hit his Shadow Ward, and with a little sound, it disappeared. The next stroke of the whip penetrated his defences, and Griggin cried out in pain. He did not want to kill one of his own, and yet, he must, or he would perish, and many others with him. He must kill, but he hesitated, tried to put off the moment of his defeat. He would be useless. Incapable of giving out the guidance young Warlocks needed so much. Griggin leapt aside, and Bezoar's shadow bolt sailed past him. Griggin needed to decide. Now. Life. Death. Both spelled defeat, but which was the greater one? He craved *simplicity*, and among his arsenal of spells, there was one that provided all he needed.

Griggin shouted the syllables. His body disappeared in a cloud of purple haze, and coalesced into a much larger, more deadly shape.

Griggin roared. Gone was all doubt, all ambiguity. Here were his enemies. They must die. The Succubus,

small and insignificant now, before his form, lashed out with its whip again. Griggin shrugged off the attack. He charged forward, great claws slashing out. The female form was thrown back, crashing into the wall of the tunnel, and slumped, trying without success to raise itself. Griggin slashed out at it as it lay. It was the enemy. It must be torn to pieces. It must die. Dark Demonic blood gushed from deep wounds in the Succubus' stomach, chest, throat. It gave one gurgling cry, then fell dead to the floor.

Griggin cried out, words in the language of Eredun.

"Katra zil shukil!"

Suffer and perish.

He turned to Bezoar, who was pelting him with his pathetic little shadow bolts. He felt them eat into his Demonic form, but ignored them. He grasped the Gnome between his claws. His leg came away easily. So did his arm. Griggin dropped the body to the ground, put a foot on it, took the head between his claws, and pulled.

"Shaza-kiel!"

Griggin stood still in the dim light of the Deeprun Tram tunnel. His eyes were closed. Between his hands

was an object that he did not want to look at, but had to. He opened his eyes, to look into Bezoar's staring, burnt face. Griggin resisted an urge to throw the horrible... thing away from him, and gently put it down on the floor. He wiped his hands on his robes, but the feeling of filth remained.

"I am... sorry," said Griggin. "I am so sorry."

Fighting the urge to throw up, he gathered the body parts in a heap, then raised his hand. Fire blasted down, and the thing that had once been Bezoar, burnt to ashes. Griggin took up his staff, turned round and walked back towards Ironforge without looking back.

File GSB-100: Departure

Lenna opened the door to her home, and walked in, followed by Griggin, Trixie, and Nix. Richard hesitated. Trixie looked over her shoulder at him.

"Are you going to come in?"

Richard looked at his feet. "I think I shouldn't. Not without telling Father. I have to sort it out with him first, before..."

Trixie put her arms round Richard.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. At school."

"Count on it," said Richard.

Lenna and Griggin gave each other a look. Lenna shrugged, and walked in. She blinked. Raven was still sitting on the floor, glaring at her. Next to her lay Bieslook, head in her lap, asleep. A biscuit tin lay on the floor, its lid next to it, empty, dead, violated.

"Nix?"

"Mum?"

"I don't mind you bringing a girlfriend home, but if you're going to play kinky games with her, I'd like to know beforehand."

Bieslook stirred, woke up, and saw Lenna. She squealed, and ran at her, wrapped her arms round Lenna's middle. Lenna lifted her up, with some difficulty, and held her close.

Raven glared at the group of Gnomes. She took a deep breath, and yelled.

"Alright! I'm sorry I tried to stab Nix, I *don't* know who made me do it, he did it in the Deeprun Tram, and I was as horny as a goat. Now will somebody get these bloody cuffs *off* me?"

Bieslook looked round, with eyes as large as saucers.

"You had *horns*?"

Raven looked at Bieslook, a weary look on her face.

"Yes, kid. I had horns. On my head, and boy did I look silly. Luckily, I got better."

Griggin smiled, shook his head. "Of course, Miss Raven. Nix?"

Nix reached behind Raven. There was a click and the cuffs came off. Raven rubbed her wrists, and got to her feet.

"Well, I'd say it's been fun, but it hasn't been. Catch you later."

"Miss Raven?" Griggin looked up at Raven. "Without you, this afternoon would have ended in an even greater tragedy than it already has. Please accept my thanks for your help. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Um," said Raven. She was hungry. Biscuits don't really fill one up.

"I think I have some sausages left in the cold box," said Lenna. "I could make a stew."

Lenna pointed at the Game board. Because there were more than four players, they had put on the second level, with the added walkways.

"So. Stations are yellow, because it's Wednesday. That means the Circle Line is at double bonus points, and you get an extra busker on the main points."

"Riiiiight," said Raven. "So I start at the Tower Hill, right?"

"Nonono," said Trixie. "You can't start on a yellow station."

"I thought they were *all* yellow."

"No, that's just their *base* colour. By 'yellow' I mean a station on the Circle. We're playing the Woodbridge variant, so if you could start on the bonus colour, it'd

give you too much of an advantage early in the game, so that's why yellow starts are banned."

Raven looked at Trixie.

"All... right. So. New Cross?"

Nix shook his head. "Well, you can if you want, but that just adds miles to your path. Try Elephant and Castle."

"Nix! You're setting her up to shunt me, aren't you?"

"Whatever gives you *that* idea?"

"What's shunting?" Raven looked thoroughly lost.

"A loser move to make someone else take a long way round," said Trixie. "Only complete noobs do it this early in the game."

Lenna knocked on the table. "E and C it is. Let's not turn this into a Gnome-moot, shall we? Richmond."

"Edgware," said Griggin.

"Knightsbridge," said Trixie.

Nix sneered. "You know what's going to happen if you do that, right?"

"Bite me, sneaky boy."

"No prob. Baron's court."

"Shunt me, and I'll kick you."

"Children." Griggin's voice sounded tired. "For tonight, let's keep it civil. No larping. Miss Raven, may I suggest you travel up the Northern? If you are lucky, you could make it all the way to the Monument."

Raven stared at the board, then up at Griggin.

"You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?"

Nix sat with his feet on the bench, looking out of the window. Due to a move by Raven, on Trixie's advice, he'd ended up in Nidd, and was unlikely to emerge before someone else won. He didn't even mind too much. His mind wasn't on the game. With a sigh, he got up.

"I need a long walk. Fresh air. Think I'll see if I can get to Kharanos. If I get out of Nidd, shunt Trix."

Trixie stuck out her tongue.

Griggin put a hand on Nix' shoulder, and looked into his eyes.

"Son, those women would have died no matter what you did. Either the Daemons would have driven them insane, or the Circle would have executed them. They would not have been as quick about it as you were."

Nix nodded, and walked out of the door.

Nix walked out of the Gates. Just outside, there was a small open-air forge run by some Human man. Nix looked at the sunset, and the fiery red colours in the sky. He sighed, and walked on. There was a small wall round the platform, to keep careless wanderers from throwing themselves into the valley of Dun Morogh, several hundred yards below. On it sat a dark-haired Gnome girl, wearing plate armour. She was looking West, and not moving.

Nix walked up to her. She heard his footsteps, and looked round. Nix took a deep breath.

"What is *wrong* with you?" he shouted. "Just what by the rampaging Titans is *wrong*?"

Dora said nothing, just looked at him.

"You... women! All I've ever done is try to be nice to you, and *you* treat me like I want to sell your organs on the auction house."

Dora looked at her feet, and said nothing.

"And alright, I'll admit it. I *was* hoping to get a bit closer to you. In the clothes-off sense. I'll admit it! You're *gorgeous*, and I would *love* to do that with you. So what in Azeroth is *wrong* with that? I'm sure that in this day and age girls are allowed to *enjoy* it, even."

Nix took a deep breath, and pointed back at Ironforge, finger trembling.

"And meanwhile, some murdering *bastard* just has to snap his fingers, and you trot along happy as anything. Oooo! He melts *faces*! That's sooo sexy!"

Nix looked at Dora, eyes burning with rage, taking deep breaths.

"I give up! I just don't *care* anymore. Get stuffed, the lot of you!"

Nix turned round and took a step back to the Gates. Before he had the chance to take three steps, there was someone's hand gripping his arm. Nix jerked his arm, but Dora had a surprisingly strong grip. Nix looked round, into Dora's face. He swallowed. Dora was too tough to cry. But the look in her eyes said that if she hadn't been, that's what she would have been doing. She slowly pulled Nix to her, put her arms round him. Nix put his hands on her back, carefully, as if she might suddenly sprout spikes. He closed his eyes. Dora's voice was small, and he almost couldn't make it out over the wind.

"Nix," she said. "Keep your mouth shut, and this may just work."

Dora lived in a room at the edge of the Military Ward, a place reserved for the children of soldiers and officers. Her room was small. There was just enough space for a sofa, which presumably unfolded into a bed, a cupboard, and a small desk. A petroleum burner was on a shelf in the corner. Nix looked round.

Bookshelves were on the walls, and there were pegs where Dora could hang her plate armour. A trunk held her weapons. Nix looked at Dora, who was striking a match, lighting the burner. She shook out the match, dropped it in an ashtray and put on the kettle. They hadn't spoken a word all the way between the Gates and here.

"This is nice," said Nix.

Dora looked over her shoulder, and there was a kind, almost amused look in her grey-blue eyes. She opened a cupboard and got two mugs out.

"I thought you'd live with your folks," said Nix. He spotted the copper pipes he'd welded together hurriedly, on a shelf, though the flowers were gone.

"They're not here," said Dora.

"Oh. Where..."

"Gnomeregan," said Dora.

Nix winced, and kicked himself. Dora sighed.

"They're in a cleared area, defending it as a foothold. They're not dead."

"Sorry," said Nix.

"I've just had word. My little brother. He's... had an accident. Fighting irradiated Troggs. He got sprayed with acid, and the healers couldn't get to him all that quick. He'll live, but..."

Dora stopped, closed her eyes, looked down.

"Dammit Nix. I asked you to keep your mouth shut, didn't I?"

Nix sighed. "I'm sorry, Dora. I should probably go."

"No. Please don't. Just..." Dora looked up at Nix.
"Don't."

Nix gave a little nod. Dora turned round, picked up a tin and shook it over a small pot.

"Whoa!" said Nix. "*Instant* coffee? Stand back, I'll save you."

Dora looked over her shoulder, and laughed.

"Yes. These are coffee leaves. Sit down, Steambender."

Nix sat down on Dora's sofa, and looked up at her, as she took off her plate armour and hung it on the pegs on the wall, inspecting it for damage as she did.

Underneath, she wore a loose white shirt that hung down to her thighs. She poured boiling water over the tea leaves.

"So, what have you been up to this afternoon? What's all this about murdering bastards?"

Nix didn't answer for a moment. Was he even supposed to talk about this? It involved Warlocks. Never a happy subject. Sod it. Nix wasn't very happy anyway.

"It's my dad's apprentice, acolyte, whatever. He'd gone bad from listening to Daemons. And dragged a whole bunch of women down with him. They grabbed my Mum, and made one of my classmates try to kill me."

"Damn," said Dora. "I have a third cousin who's a Warlock. He gives me the creeps. Your *dad* is a Warlock? Why would he want to do that?"

"You don't get to choose. You either get good at it, like my dad, or you go mad. Usually end up killing lots of people."

"People like... Gemma?"

"Think so, yes. Oh gods... They'd tortured some poor Dwarf woman to death. And just left her body to hang there."

"And you got them," said Dora.

"Yeah. Me, Trix, Richard, Mum once we'd got her loose. Dad got the apprentice."

Dora poured tea into their mugs, and handed one to Nix.

"Sorry. No milk."

"Don't ever apologise for not putting milk in tea or coffee."

Dora laughed, and sat down on the sofa next to Nix. Nix noticed that she'd sat down underneath his arm, which was lying on the back of the sofa.

"So that's what got you all in a twist."

"Yeah. Sorry for shouting at you. You didn't deserve that."

"No worries," said Dora. She sipped tea.

They fell silent. Nix looked at Dora's books. Fighting manuals. Biography of Gelbin Mekkatorque. A few trashy romance novels. Should he put his arm round her shoulders? She might kill him. Was it worth it? Dora finished her tea, and reached across Nix' lap to put it on the side table. She ended up leaning against him. Nix looked at her from the corner of his eye. Her body felt warm. She looked up at him, amused. He felt more

than heard her laugh. She reached up, picked up his arm and pulled it round her. She put her own arm round Nix' waist, and turned her face up to him, eyes closed. Nix didn't dare breathe or speak. Dora looked at Nix through her eyelashes.

"Would you like me to write you an invite, Steambender?"

Raven had left. Trixie had gone to bed with a book. Bieslook was asleep. Lenna was putting away the last of the coffee cups. Griggin sighed, got up from his chair and took his robes from the peg.

"Are you going out, love?"

Griggin nodded. "There are things I must do, and I can't put them off. I won't be too long."

Lenna looked out through the window.

"Will Nix be alright?"

"I think so. We caught all of Bezoar's... associates. If we missed any, his influence will have worn off tomorrow morning, and there's just these poor women's souls to worry about. Unlikely we'll be able to save them. May the Light grant that we have them all."

Lenna put her arms round Griggin.

"You did what you had to do today. You are a good Gnome."

Griggin held Lenna in his arms. She was right, but she was also wrong. It's what he should have done these last few weeks that was the problem.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

Mr. Ironhand walked into the room, impeccably dressed in his black suit, despite the fact that it was far past midnight.

"Mr. Steambender. I have been told that you have news for me."

"I have, Sir. I have found those who are responsible for the death of your daughter."

Gryll Ironhand's weathered face showed nothing of his emotions.

"Where are they now?"

"They are dead, Sir. They came out of hiding to destroy my family. Luckily, we were able to prevent them from doing so."

"Good. Who were they?"

Griggin looked at one of the pictures hanging on Mr. Ironhand's wall. Then, he looked into Gryll Ironhand's

eyes.

"The main culprit was my student. Unknown to me, his mind was corrupted by a fel entity, which drove him insane. I was not able to see it happening, much less prevent it. I am deeply sorry."

"Have you had many students?"

"Perhaps a dozen or two, Sir."

Gryll Ironhand ran his hand through his beard.

"Several dozen Warlocks, in this city? May the Light preserve us."

"Most of us are well able to resist temptation, Sir. There were about two hundred of us in Gnomeregan. This was... an isolated incident."

"That is a mercy, little comfort though it is to me. Thank you for telling me this, Mr. Steambender. Now unless there is anything I can do for you, please excuse me. I must pray."

"There is one thing, Sir. One of the victims of my student's circle was the daughter of the keeper of the House of Ribs. Her remains are still in a side-tunnel of the Deeprun Tram, and they need to be returned to her father." Griggin looked up into Mr. Ironhand's eyes. "If you can avoid Mr. Oakenfire seeing the body, it would

spare him distress."

"No, Mr. Steambender. We Dwarves do not shy away from the grim aspects of life. Pain and suffering serve to off-set the joys of living in the Light." He sighed. "So poor Glynis is dead, after all. Do you know how she died?"

Griggin nodded quietly. "She was murdered in a brutal fashion by my student and his associates. This was no battle, Sir. It was the wanton destruction of another living being. If we must convey this to Mr. Oakenfire, warn him to brace himself."

"We? Do you wish to be there when he receives the news?"

"Sir, I consider it to be my duty."

The cart stopped in front of the House of Ribs. The door opened, and Glynis Oakenfire's remains were carried inside, and gently laid down on the table. With trembling hands, Mr. Oakenfire pulled away the sheet and looked at his daughter's burnt face. His shoulders hunched, and he started shaking. Then, he howled. Howled as only a strong man can, when finally it is too much, and he doesn't care anymore what anyone thinks of him.

"Wizards! Warlocks! Murderers all! Look at what they *did* to you! Curse them! Crush them and grind them to dust!"

Griggin had pulled back his hood, and wished he could pull it up again, hide his face. He made himself look at Mr. Oakenfire, who was now sobbing on Mr. Ironhand's beautiful expensive suit.

"Sham," said Mr. Ironhand. He pointed at Griggin. "He is the one who slew them who did this to Glynis."

Sham Oakenfire looked at Griggin, through tear-filled eyes. His voice was hoarse.

"Thank ye, Sir. Thank ye for avenging my daughter."

Griggin bowed his head.

"I am so sorry," he said. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Excellent! Excellent, my friend. Cleared up the whole problem. I hope nobody of your family was hurt?"

"Not much, Sir," said Griggin. "Bumps and bruises."

"Good. Very good. And without anyone the wiser that it was a Warlock who was to blame. Well done."

Griggin scowled at Acting Chief Warlock Briarthorn.

"I told Gryll Ironhand, Sir."

"*What?!* What in Azeroth made you do that? Do you have any notion at all how this is going to affect..."

"It was his right to know, Sir. We messed up. / messed up. We cannot keep our friends ignorant. Not if we truly wish to be their friends, rather than simply troublesome guests."

"You *idiot!* Do you realise how much careful diplomacy you've just swept into the bin? It's going to take *ages* to cover this up."

"Then perhaps we should not seek to cover it up. Do you think you can convince the Dwarves of Ironforge that we are *nice people*? We are *not*, Sir. We are the ones who walk at the edge of darkness, because we *must*. And sometimes, some of us fall over the edge, and when they do, those of us who can, do whatever is needed to mend the situation. At whatever cost to ourselves."

The door opened. Silhouetted in the entrance stood a robed figure. A staff was in his hand, and underneath his cowl, cruel lights burnt in his eyes.

"Trainer Briarthorn. Good day to you, and may your mind be steadfast."

Acting Chief Warlock Briarthorn stared, and even under his hood, Griggin could see his face turn white.

"Chief... Sindala?"

"Indeed. It is good to see that someone has seen fit to take up the mantle during my absence."

"Only... only temporarily, Sir. Until your return, and I hereby relinquish my office and welcome you back to the Circle."

"It is less good to see that during my absence, a group of unchecked Warlocks was allowed to run rampant in the city of Ironforge, causing grief and suffering."

"It was Warlock Griggin's apprentice, Sir. He fell to Darkness, and committed the atrocities that you have undoubtedly heard of."

"And who allowed this to happen?"

Griggin bowed his head, and faced Chief Sindala.

"I did, Sir. I missed the signs that another Entity had taken control of young Bezoar's mind."

"Did you not consult with your fellow Warlocks?"

"Yes, Sir. But ultimately, the mistake was mine."

"Hmm. Is Bezoar dead?"

"Yes sir. I extinguished him when it became clear that he was beyond saving. The unfortunate women he seduced to Darkness are also dead."

"Good. At least someone here is competent enough to fix their mistakes. Warlock Briarthorn. How have you handled this situation?"

"Well Sir, I tried my hardest to keep the matter confidential, but then Warlock Griggin exposed us to the Dwarves. We may have to..."

"Thank you, Trainer Briarthorn. I must confess that I hoped I could leave you to your own devices for a while during my stay in Stormwind. I have been able to establish a rapport with the Human Warlock circle there, which may prove to be essential to our endeavours here. This affair is... most unfortunate. But no rest for the wicked, I suppose. You may go, Trainer Briarthorn."

"Thank you, Sir," said Briarthorn. He left with poor grace and a nasty look at Griggin.

Chief Warlock Sindala took a deep breath, and looked round. He shook his head.

"What a dismally sub-standard set-up we have here. I see there is much work to be done. I suppose I had better get on with it. Oh. Before you go, Griggin, there is something I'd like you to do for me."

Griggin looked up. "Please Sir, I don't feel I should take on any apprentices for a while."

Sindala studied Griggin's face, gave a single nod. "I agree. You have failed grievously, and you require time to extract the wisdom from that failure. But this is not an apprentice. I would like you to take over a Voidwalker, who has been mishandled."

"Mishandled? In what way?"

"The Warlock in question, a certain Aquaregis, could not help it, as he was dying. His young slave then dismissed the Daemon improperly. 'Piss off then', indeed. If only the Unknowing knew how much damage they did. The Daemon's abridged name is Thuljuk. You will find his true name in this document. I do not wish this Daemon to be handled by a rank beginner. We have a duty of care, as specified in the Covenant."

"Hurzag will be only too happy to be rid of me, Sir. I accept."

Dora lay on her bed, on her stomach, head on her arms, eyes closed. As Nix had expected, the bed was made by folding out the sofa with a mechanism so simple, elegant and beautiful that Nix had almost folded it back in again to see how it worked. Dora had vetoed that very effectively by taking her shirt off. Nix lay next

to her, looking at her, head leaning on his hand. Even now, with every inch of her skin available to the eye, his eyes were still drawn to her face, though Nix did notice a few bruises on her ribs, due no doubt to some enthusiastic sparring at school. Warrior girls were not treated like delicate flowers. Dora opened her eyes lazily, and smiled at Nix. His stomach knotted up.

"That was nice," said Dora.

"It was. Thank you."

Dora rolled over onto her side.

"My pleasure."

Nix looked into Dora's eyes, intense, bright, framed by dark hair. Dora reached out and ran her hand up Nix' chest.

"So," said Nix. "What happens next?"

Dora grinned. "Well, do you notice that nice warm glowy feeling?"

"Uh yeah."

"Well, you wait till that goes away, and then you do it again. And you keep repeating it till one of us can't move anymore."

"One of us..."

"Well you. Cause you're a wimp."

Nix laughed. "Or until we run out of sonkies."

Dora rolled onto her back, grinning.

"I'm sure I've got another pack somewhere, but don't let that keep you from trying."

"So what are we now? Lovers? Am I your boyfriend? Lost souls seeking comfort? What?"

"Nix, I like you. Really. You're not as bad as I thought you were."

"Oh *good*."

"But you and me, we're *fighters*. What do you expect? Love forevermore? I'll be leaving in a few weeks, for Gnomeregan. Join the fight there. I may be *dead* next month, or hurt so bad that you'd never want to look at me again."

"Dora, I'd never..."

"Shut up Nix. Don't make promises you can't keep. If I'd got half my face ripped off in a fight, I wouldn't *want* to come back."

Nix stared. "But..."

"You know, my commander is going to put me in harm's way. Fighting Troggs, fighting the leper Gnomes. Left-over technology. Thermaplugg's cronies. And sometimes, commanders *know* when they send

people out, that they're not going to see them back.
And we know. And still, I'll go."

"Why?"

"Because if I don't, then we *all* die. That's why there's only *here*, and there's only *now*. And here and now, I'm yours. All of me. Nothing held back."

Nix said nothing for a few moments.

"What about tomorrow? Can we do tomorrow?"

Dora put her hand on Nix' face.

"Sure. I can do tomorrow. Tomorrow's fine. Can we do some here and now please?"

"Gods, yeah!"

Griggin was working in his own workshop, on a little project he'd given himself. All the IGNITE stuff was coming along nicely. Contractors were annoying all the Ironforge citizenry by ripping out the streets for pipes. He needed some time to himself, and had pulled a design out of his box at random. It was the Loyly design, but since nobody in Ironforge was likely to speak Nordic much, he'd named it Steambender's Relaxing Steam Bath. The first prototype was taking shape in his workshop. He'd connected an OP-500

steam heater to it, fitted the cold showers to cool off. The OP-500 was a leftover. It had been decommissioned when the Dwarves in question had been connected up to the IGNITE network. He'd offered to take it away for them for nothing. It was scandalously over-powered for the job. As always, he'd shamelessly used his own family as test subjects. Lenna had screamed as the cold water hit her. She had taken some convincing that that was as designed and people actually enjoyed it. All that was left to do was to test the sterilisation function. Griggin lifted the cover on the big red button marked, in big letters, **STERILISE!** He pressed it, and there was a mighty blast of super-heated steam. It kept on blowing for exactly thirty seconds, then shut off. Griggin opened the chamber. Hmm. All the wood was still wet. He'd have to add some kind of ventilation system to dry it out, preventing wood rot. Still, as a proof-of-concept, it was ready for demonstration.

Trixie walked into school, humming a tune, and looked round. Richard wasn't there yet, but Dora was. Trixie waved. Dora grinned and waved back. Trixie gave her a Look, and sat down next to her.

"I haven't seen Nix all night yesterday, and *you* look like a cat who's eaten a whole cage full of canaries. Start talking."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ye gods. *That* good?"

"Well, let's say we've settled our differences. We have both learnt a valuable lesson. I have learnt that your brother is not a sick little pervert after all, and *he* has learnt that, when the mood strikes me, I *am*."

"Ugh," said Trixie. "Too much information."

"Well if you can't stand the answer, don't ask the question."

"I suppose. Speaking of which, have you seen Richard? Did Nix have time during your busy night to tell you what happened?"

"He did. By the Light, I wish I'd been there!"

"Yeah it was fun, in an entirely un-fun way. Anyway. I want to ask Richard how his arm is, and whether he needs someone to rub salve into it or something."

"Oh? Did you..." Dora wiggled her eyebrows.

"No, dammit. His dad has something against Warlocks, and he's told Richard not to talk to me."

"Oh. Well, there's always touching and tasting."

"Ye gods, you *are* in a pervy mood."

"Yes!"

"Richard Sparkbolt?" Trainer Tosslespanner sighed. "I'm afraid his father has removed him from this school."

"What? Why?"

"No idea. Didn't want to talk about it, but apparently he's going to move to Sentinel Hill, in Westfall. Why anyone would want to... Miss Steambender?"

Trixie bent over the neck of her Mechanostrider as it clunked noisily along the road to Coldridge Valley. In the distance, she could see two Gnomes on a little cart. Trixie tried to wring every last bit of speed out of the old *truttenschudder*.

"Richard!"

Trixie could see Richard look back, then at his father beside him as he bit a few words at him. Richard jumped off the cart, and ran towards Trixie. Trixie slammed on the brakes, jumped off the strider and hung on to Richard for dear life.

"Got you, you bastard. Did you think you could just get away from me?"

Richard said nothing. Trixie's eyes burnt with anger.

"What have you got to say for yourself? Don't like long goodbyes? Any goodbyes at all?"

"Father wouldn't let me. We were going to go to Westfall at the end of the year anyway, but with all this... Father decided to go now."

"But what about..."

"Trix. I love you. I do. But I can't ignore my dad. You couldn't go against your dad's wishes, could you?"

"Find a better dad," said Trixie.

Richard let that go. He sighed.

"I had to choose. I couldn't be with you without telling my dad, and my dad can't get on with Warlocks. He's my father."

Trixie's shoulders jerked in something between a sob and a laugh. Not looking at Richard, she simply stood there.

"Daddy or Trix. Trix or Daddy."

Richard laughed, at a joke that would be funny if it weren't so sad. He pulled Trixie to him.

"I want you both," he said. "But it'll take some work."

The cart stopped next to them.

"What by the Titans do *you* think you're doing? Get back on, we're late."

"We're two months early, Father," said Richard.

"Don't give me that." He turned to Trixie. "And you Miss, stay away from my son. I'm sure he can do better than the offspring of some trollop and a devil worshipper."

"*Father!*" Richard bristled with anger. "If you're going to drive, drive."

Mustrum Sparkbolt grunted, pulled the reins on his cart and drove off. Trixie looked at the cart, vanishing in the distance. Her strider's engine was still running. She leapt on, turned it round with some effort, and set off back to Ironforge.

Lenna hadn't had Trixie in her arms like this for years. She was sitting on Trixie's bed, leaning against the wall, Her big strong daughter was lying back with her head on Lenna's stomach.

"He called you a trollop," said Trixie. "I didn't even want to hit him. What's the point."

"I've been called worse," said Lenna. "And with perfectly good reason. I'm afraid I wasn't very respectable some forty years ago."

Trixie looked up. Lenna stroked her hair, looking ahead of her.

"I, well... let's say that boyfriends didn't last very long in the Greenhollow part of town. Days. Hours, even. There was this girl, Ginger. My very best friend. We had a competition going on." Lenna shook her head. "I don't really want to remember. I caused a lot of grief back then. I only got out of that world by nearly dying of alcohol poisoning."

"But you *never* drink. Not even shandy or a single glass of wine."

"Still scared to. Once you cross a certain line, there's no going back. I don't ever want to be in that same situation again. Trixie, I'll ask you something and I really mean it. If you ever see me drunk, punch my lights out. I'm not joking. But anyway, if someone calls me a trollop, I can't really deny it. Stupid old fashioned word anyway."

"He called Dad a devil worshipper."

"Well, *that* is a load of old bollocks. But that miserable little git Bezoar was. In a way. And that's

what people think of when they hear the word 'Warlock'. And not a century of being good ever fixes that."

Trixie closed her eyes.

"Damn it. Why couldn't Richard just have told me to piss off? Easier all round."

"Because he loves you," said Lenna.

"Well, he's gone with Daddy. Says he'll try to talk him into believing we're not the scum he thinks we are."

"Who knows? Maybe he will."

Trixie shook her head, pink tails brushing Lenna's arm.

"I'm counting on maybe one letter. Then it'll fizzle out."

"I don't know," said Lenna. "Don't give up hope."

Griggin walked back and forth, trying not to laugh at the row of Dwarves, who were sitting on a wooden bench in their underwear, waiting their turn. Inside the small room, the steam was circulating round the room exactly as calculated, and the filth of years was being removed from rough Dwarf skins. The first test had been a resounding success, with Dwarves coming out

laughing at each other's screams as the cold water replaced the hot steam.

"Scuse me, Master Steambender?"

"Yes?"

The Dwarf pointed at the Big Red Button.

"What's 'Sterilise' mean?"

"Ah," said Griggin. "The Sterilise button releases a high-pressure cloud of super-heated steam into the chamber, for an intense cleansing, getting rid of any fungus or skin flakes that may have built up during use."

"Brilliant! Just the thing for that smelly lot inside!" He shouted into the door. "Yer about to be taken to the *cleaners* ye filthy buggers!"

He raised the cover on the button.

He pressed the button.

The heat pump roared.

A high-pressure cloud of super-heated steam was released into the chamber.

The screams started.

Griggin turned pale, and leaped at the pump. With his fist, he smashed the glass window, and pressed the emergency shut-off. There was a noise like thunder,

and great clouds of steam billowed from the exhaust pipes.

"Open the bloody door! Get them out!"

Four Dwarves were pulled from the steam bath, skins red as lobsters. One of the dwarves, a healer, shouted.

"Fire damage! Get them here!"

He closed his eyes, concentrated, and as best as he could without his usual armour and equipment, cast spells of healing on the burnt Dwarves. After a while, their skins returned to their usual colour.

Griggin glared at the Dwarf who'd pressed the button, shaking.

"You *idiot!* The sterilise function is meant to kill anything in the chamber that could make you sick! Funguses! Fleas! Whatever else comes off you when you clean! You don't do it with people *inside!* That's why the sodding button is on the *outside!* With a cover on!"

"Then why dint ye say so, ye great pillock?"

"I *did* say so! What part of 'high-pressure super-heated steam' *don't* you understand?"

The Priest, who was sitting on the bench, slowly sipping a sweet drink to replenish his mana, looked

round.

"Why don't we all calm down, and head for Stonefire Tavern, for a few pints?"

"Good plan! All this cleanin' and bathin' can't be good for ye."

Griggin looked at the last few wisps of steam that came from the boiler as the Dwarves filed out. He sat down with his head in his hands.

"What have I done to deserve this?"

Stephen walked over to Griggin with another strong cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Mr. Smolt, but I didn't..."

"You had the distinct appearance of needing it, Sir," said Stephen. "Please accept this as a gift from the house."

"He *sued* me! First, he by-passes all the safety features, and nearly boils his friends, and then he has the gall to blame it on me."

"I trust your defence was adequate, Sir?"

"Oh yes. The Judge threw out the case. I never expected to hear the words 'ye stupid bugger' in a court of Law. Unfortunately, I am not being judged inside the

courtroom."

Stephen sighed, and decided to commit the *faux pas* of sitting down next to Griggin.

"People are like that, Sir. As soon as one enters into a commercial agreement, there is a tendency for personal responsibility to be left, languishing, by the wayside. My second cousin twice removed ran a weapons factory. Just a small one, in Brewnall Village, where he manufactured firearms of exceptional quality and workmanship. He was sued for criminal negligence, by a gentleman who had seen fit to shorten the barrel of a rifle, and not being content with even this savagery, to file out the chamber so that larger-calibre ammunition might be fitted. I am sad to say that the first test firing removed two of his fingers and one of his eyes. The result was an entirely undeserved reputation for producing weapons that are almost as dangerous to the operator as they are to the target. Poor Wesson never recovered, Sir. I think I still have one of his rifles about the place. And to my shame, I must admit that firing it always gives me pause."

"I think I might want to apply to the King for a new law, mandating capital punishment for deviating from any device's operating procedures."

"That is legislation that deserves all due consideration, Sir," said Stephen. "You have my best wishes for the attempt."

Griggin called the Family Meeting to order.

"My dear family, the situation, while not desperate, is serious. For about three months now, I have not been able to make any profit on my Optimal Prime series of water heaters. With IGNITE water supplies now reaching more than half of Ironforge, many people don't need them, and those that do have somehow got the idea that it's about to boil them alive. Which I trace back to the unfortunate incident with the steam bath."

"Should have tied their hands behind their backs," said Nix.

"Next time, Nix, I will. My suggestion, meanwhile, is that we move our business elsewhere. I have had word that the Humans of Stormwind are building a new harbour. Opportunities abound for competent Engineers. What are your opinions?"

Trixie looked up. "Stormwind. Is that closer to Westfall or further away?"

"Closer," said Nix.

"For it," said Trixie. Much to her surprise, Richard had been keeping in touch, writing letters about his work as a guard in Sentinel Hill. He still had Trixie address her letters to a nearby farm, though, presumably to avoid them being intercepted by his father.

Nix sneered. He had visited Dora at her station in Gnomeregan, but Dora now had to keep herself upright in a group of battle-hardened Warriors. Though she was still the same girl underneath, she had built up a plate-steel armour type attitude that she could not afford to let down, even for a moment. She had shown him to the door, 'boosted' him, as she said, and they had kissed before he left, Nix in his Rogue's leathers, Dora in her plate armour. There had been a glimmer of a smile on her face, a 'take care of yourself', and that, more or less, was it.

"For it," said Nix.

Lenna looked at her son, knowing exactly what he was thinking of.

"For it," she said. "As long as we don't take that bloody tram. I never want to enter that tunnel again as long as I live."

"There are no ships yet from Menethil to Stormwind," said Griggin. "We could go on foot, or take a cart. Even mail our belongings ahead. I think a small expedition could do us good."

"Sounds like fun," said Nix.

"Bieslook? What do you think?"

"Do we have sausages on the campfire?"

"We could do," said Lenna, with a smile.

"Yay!"

Raven lay back on Old Beardy's arm, notepad on her knee, looking at the people passing by. She didn't really need to do this anymore, but it would edge her results in the right direction, and it was relaxing. Just a few more weeks, and her time would be up. She had her Subtlety and Combat papers almost in her pocket. If she flunked something, she could probably just steal the paper. She looked down. Four Gnomish mechanostriders, heavily laden. Four, no *five* Gnomes. Well, four-and-a-half. So that was the Steambender family out of here, then. Raven almost waved, but Rogues live their lives not drawing attention to themselves. She smiled.

"So long kid," she said. "Best of luck with the Mage stuff."

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