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## Escape from Gnomeregan

Hamfred Bubblecork III carefully removed another fractured piece of metal from the charred arcanite converter encased in the finely wrought thorium-link belt. The arclight spanner was steady, even though his hand was a mass of bandages after this morning's tinkering session. The workshop around him was cluttered with spent target dummies, bolts and tubes of various materials, mechanical squirrel parts, and sheaf upon sheaf of half-completed schematics. A small enough studio for one gnome to live and work in; having to squeeze two into the small room was at once a sign of the family's diminishing status, as well as its diminishing finances. Hamfred didn't mind sharing the tiny apartment with his brother, and if it ever occurred to him that their situation was what others might consider 'dire', the thought never more than briefly peeked out from multitude of budding blueprints that typically cranked and whirled though his head. He simply didn't have time to dwell on things like 'rent' or 'bills' when the world held the promise of so much that had yet to be invented.

He was snapped from his happy reverie tinkering away with the intricate wiring on the inside of the belt by the loud slam of the front door - apparently his younger brother Keto was home.

"Greetings!" he called out to his brother, who stood just inside the cramped apartment-turned-workshop. The low humming of the city's motors were muted through the door, but Hamfred could still tell from the distinctive sound of the gyrogears that it was the city was in low-power mode, making it far later than business hours, and well past dinner. Slightly shorter than Hamfred, and still sporting a full head of curly red hair (although to be fair, Hamfred hadn't had hair since secondary school years ago), Keto was a gnome's gnome. His sharp, masculine features and solid, athletic build would have made him very popular with the ladies if he'd ever spent any time paying attention to them. The freshly pressed suit he'd put on this morning showed few wrinkles, but the papers crumpled in his hands and his face of barely suppressed rage told Hamfred how the day had gone for the other gnome.

"I don't see where they get off being so down-right cruel," Keto sputtered, tossing his jacket onto his small bed against the far wall of the room. "I'm only out to revolutionize the world - and make them rich in the process - and they treat me like I'm some sort of diseased murloc."

"Did any of them look at the plans?" Hamfred asked, suspecting he knew the answer already.

"The plans?" Keto gave a strained half-laugh, shaking his head in exasperation. "I never even got past the clerks! They shoo me away and laugh behind my back, calling me 'Crazy Keto the Brainsick Bubblecork'. I'm quite certain I'll be the butt of several jokes made in the clerk's office for the rest of the week." Calming slightly and plopping on the stool across the workbench, Keto laid down the crinkled papers.

Hamfred could see the familiar diagrams and figures on the crumpled pages of the schematics he'd been working on over the past 18 months since their father had been removed to the Goldbolt Happy-Gnome Asylum, leaving the family business in their hands. At first they'd taken turns going out trying to find sponsors and engineers interested in buying or building their various inventions, but it had pretty quickly become evident that Keto was better at navigating the Gnomeregan business world. The schematics they'd managed to sell that weren't poorly concealed charity had been through Keto's persistence, although all of the sales had been Hamfred's designs. After a few months, they'd settled on their specialized roles, counting on each other to do what they were best at doing, and things had actually been starting to go along just fine. But that was before the troggs.

Keto was fishing through a handful of mail he'd picked up while he was out, and Hamfred saw the red bold notices on the outside of many with different variations of **OVERDUE, 90 DAYS**

LATE, and PAY US OR ELSE!

Hoping to cheer up his brother, Hamfred lifted the belt he'd been working on for the past few days, announcing, "Our troubles may be over, Keto; let me present for your consideration a completed proto-type for the Invulnerability Belt! It needs a lot more power than I can give it to run perfectly, but even so - it works! When activated, it'll protect the wearer from . . . well, anything! Patent pending, of course."

Keto looked impressed, but before he could comment on the fabulous belt, a dull thunder boomed through the room, and the lights flickered, halting the conversation. They looked at each other for a moment, when without further provocation, the hazard-warning light over their door started to flash. There was no siren to accompany it and no further rumbling, just the silent flashing of the emergency light.

"I thought you fixed that," Keto asked, moving over to the door and grabbing stool.

"I got tied up finishing a certain Invulnerability Belt that's going to get us inducted into the Association of Grand Masters Engineers of Excellence," Hamfred answered with a smile. "I can fix a faulty light after I've secured our everlasting fame."

Keto pulled a few wires apart from atop the stool and the warning light clicked off. Still from atop the stool, Keto asked in a soft voice, "Do you worry about the troggs?"

Hamfred didn't like admitting to himself he did, but he wouldn't lie to his younger brother, so answered reluctantly, "Yes, I do."

Over the past 3 months, they'd been living in a city under siege. Most of Dun Morth had been overrun by waves of the mutated troll-like creatures that had emerged from the unknown depths of the earth, and of the few civilized areas left in the region, Gnomeregan apparently held some kind of attraction to the brutish, near-mindless beasts.

Hopping down from the stool, Keto pointed to a crate of hi-explosive bombs he'd bought at auction months ago. "Those aren't tough to make, and they might help the war effort."

Hamfred shook his head, "We've been through this before, Keto," he tried to explain calmly. He didn't like when his brother lost perspective like this. "I don't care if these particular bombs are gnome approved or not, we had a deal. Besides, the value of the component parts is greater than as actual explosives, no matter how fast the army would buy them up."

"But . . ." Keto began, but Hamfred cut him off.

"We're not building bombs, guns, or any goblin-inspired shenanigans - period." He softened his voice a bit and finished, "Not after what happened to Dad."

Their Father had - of course - been careful, but with goblin-engineered devices sometimes that wasn't enough. When they'd found him 18 months ago in the old family workshop, he was unconscious near some kind of explosive projectile launcher he'd been tinkering with that had apparently detonated itself. The schematics had been purchased as a curiosity courtesy of a traveling vendor who had dealings in Booty Bay, but their Father had become obsessed with building the device. Guaranteed to work the plans said, and even if Hamfred had agreed the internal engineering looked advanced enough to be possible, it was still goblin-inspired, and goblins cut corners.

Their Father woke up after 2 days in the medical quarters, but he was never the same. Mostly he just stared at things, unable to grasp where he was or even who he was, and the priests said his mind had been shattered beyond repair.

Keto let the matter drop, and after a few more silent moments grappling with dark memories, both reluctantly began their chores of straightening the workshop and getting schematics and papers ready for tomorrow. Eventually the mood lightened, and they talked and laughed over a small dinner before bed, neither sparing a second thought about the still unplugged alarm system over top their door.

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