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Escape from Gnomeregan

Part II

Hamfred snapped awake in a cold sweat, his dream of being caught in a cave-in fresh in his mind as he sat up in bed. His heart skipped a beat when he realized the final, thunderous moments of his dream hadn't stopped now that he was awake. The ground shook, and the earthquake sound of breaking rock filled the room; looking over to Keto's bed in the dim light, he saw his brother sitting awake with a look of terror on his face. It wasn't until he heard muffled shouts from outside and the muted siren wailing from somewhere beyond their studio that Hamfred realized he wasn't hallucinating, the rumbling wasn't part of his dream - it was actually happening here in Gnomeregan!

Springing to his feet and throwing on some clothes, he saw Keto also leap out of bed, and shielded his eyes as Keto activated the room un-darkener, bathing the room in bright light.

Hamfred pulled the bolt and slid the door open, revealing a corridor in chaos beyond. Gnomes were racing to and fro with looks of fear on their faces, most carrying bags or packs that looked hastily-stuffed with belongings. At this hour of night, the corridors should have been mostly empty except for the odd gnome or three making their way home from a night shift in the workshop or train depot. But this looked like a full-blown panic, and over the din he could hear

an alarm-o-bot repeating over and over, "INTRUDER ALERT . . . INTRUDER ALERT . . ."

Hearing Keto's groan of dread, he turned to see his brother looking up at the intercom and hazard light he'd unplugged earlier. Hamfred realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach that they'd missed whatever advance notice had been given, and this quadrant was apparently being evacuated! The hallway was fast emptying, when another, louder quake shook the ground, almost throwing him from his feet. Keto came up behind him and looked out into the hall.

"We need to think about leaving," the younger gnome said. "If that's one of the transaxle rotary couplings going, it's going to bring half the city down on our heads."

Hamfred didn't hear the grinding metal that would accompany a blown transaxle, but he wasn't willing to sit and wait for it - for all that Gnomeregan might be the technological wonder of the world, she was still a machine, and subject to possible . . . malfunctions.

"Grab everything you can, and quick!" he said to Keto, then followed his own advice and began stuffing clothes, schematics, and parts into his Traveler's brand backpack. *Don't leave home without one!* the stitching under the inside flap advertised, but Hamfred wished he had four more just like it to fit everything precious he didn't want to leave behind. He made do, but most of the clothes that had gone in ended up coming back out to make space for additional schematics or partially completed devices. He was just finishing, placing the carefully wrapped Invulnerability Belt prototype on top, when he saw that his brother was rearming several of the hi-explosive bombs he'd been cannibalizing parts from.

"What are you going to do with those?"

"Listen I know you don't like goblin stuff, but we can disarm them later if we don't need them; I've just got a bad feeling, and would feel better armed."

Hamfred doubted they'd be able to recover the unstable triggers now that Keto had armed the

explosives, but despite his general misgivings about anything originally invented by goblins, he had to admit he found himself feeling slightly safer having a them.

It took less than ten minutes to get everything together, but by the time they emerged from the studio into the dormitory corridor, the place was deserted. The rumblings had stopped and someone had shut up the alarm-o-bot, but the emergency lights were still flashing an ominous red and orange warning. The silence was somehow worse.

"Where to?" Keto asked uncertainly, looking down the corridor both ways.

"If it's an evacuation, the Clockwerk Run is going to be a disaster area . . . everyone crammed into the bottleneck heading to the tram," he answered, thinking aloud. "We might want to head to the Workshop and take the back way out."

"Fine, but let's hurry!" Keto said, then led the way down the corridor towards the lower level.

Hamfred felt decidedly uneasy racing along the empty corridors of the city. The mechanical sounds of the city's heartbeat still whirled and cranked normally, but the alert lights were flashing danger at every intersection, and the empty hallways made the city feel abandoned. The echo of what sounded like distant combat came from a side corridor as another minor quake shook the hallway.

Trying to ignore the growing sense of fear working its way up his spine, Hamfred led them along hurriedly, around a corner and into the main dormitory. He saw the city had automatically deployed several of the Alarm-O-Bomb 2600 units, mechanical sentries that looked like walking trash cans with a giant hazard light mounted atop them. Designed to repel intruders by dispensing explosives, Hamfred realized for the first time the city might be in serious jeopardy.

Turning towards the Hall of Gears, the mechanical center of the city, he and Keto were stopped by a shout from a short staircase across the room.

"Hey! You two had better get over here!"

The voice belonged to a black leather clad gnome woman, her light blond hair pulled back into twin, bushy ponytails. "Get into the clean zone quick!" she hollered in a squeaky voice, motioning them up the staircase.

Hamfred didn't argue; he shot Keto a look and a shrug, then turned and charged past the Alarm-O-Bombs up the short staircase into the city recycling plant. Several gnomes with swords watched down the stairs as they entered, looking nervous and tense, while the room beyond was full of other gnomes and their families interspersed between the recycling machines, sanitation devices, and other mechanical apparatus. The place was crowded, and he and Keto moved over to stand by their new friend who'd called them over.

"You're Emi Shortfuse," Keto said to the woman, who was more absorbed listening to a conversation between two technicians behind them about seepage and radiation dangers.

"Blastmaster Emi Shortfuse to you, buddy," Emi replied curtly, "And you're lucky I saw you - you two were running straight for the Hall of Gears!"

Hamfred suddenly realized what the technicians were talking about, and felt his jaw drop open. Keto was still talking to Emi, oblivious, asking, "Is there fighting in the Hall of Gears? We were trying to get to the Workshop . . ."

"We lost contact with the Launch Bay, the Engineering Labs, AND the Workshop about twenty minutes ago - troggs have poured into the city from the upper levels and have about sundered the primary motor relays in the Upper Hall of Gears - the whole assembly is going to go any time now!"

Ignoring Emi and his brother for a moment, Hamfred pushed over to the technicians, asking incredulously, "You're going to do what?" His voice must have been louder than he planned, though, because Keto, Emi, and several other gnomes in the area turned to look at him.

"High Tinker Mekkatorque ordered the emergency venting of the city's radioactive waste tanks five minutes ago," the technician said somberly. "The troggs are pouring in from the abandoned tram tunnel near the Clockwerk Run by the dozens, and the mechanized sentries aren't going to be able to hold them. This is a Clean Zone - don't worry - the airborne pollutants won't reach here, and after the troggs die or flee, we'll just get some mops and buckets and tidy up. I'm hoping the High Tinker at least gives us a half-day holiday, though."

"I thought Mekgineer Thermaplugg collapsed those tunnels a week ago, after Anvilmar sent word of the subterranean threat?" Keto asked, but nobody had an answer. The question got washed away a moment later, though, by a loud metal screeching as the city's vents opened, followed by the heavy hiss of greenish gas pouring like mercury through water to densely coat the floor of the dormitory they'd fled just moments before.

"I hope this works," Emi whispered next to him.

"Second that," he said, "And I hope everybody on the lower levels got to a clean zone in time, too."

Emi nodded in answer, when another rumble shook the room and a loose pressure hose blew. Hamfred had about time to notice the sanitation unit behind him was suddenly un-cooled by the hose before the unstable unit burst at the top weld, and an errant iron bar knocked him into unconsciousness.

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