

Cut Short – Cameron Dayton

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Gelbin Mekkatorque: Cut Short

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Cameron Dayton

"We've done a security sweep of the upper floors in sector 17, sir. The place seems fairly untouched since our, uh, departure. Granted, everything stinks of trogg...."

"Mmmm, yes—that delightful mixture of mold, mange, and sour monkey. Puts one off of his lunch, I know."

Cog Captain Herk Winklespring grimaced, going slightly pale at his commander's description. The scent was obviously taking its toll on morale.

"And your team is equipped with my latest-model High-Velocity Nostril Squeegee?"

"Yessir. The smell... well, you can *taste* it, sir. Regardless of how well-squeegee your nostrils are." Winklespring tilted his head back, displaying a large, handsome pair of gnome nostrils that were, indeed, well-squeegee. "I've had two members of my squad request transfer to Troll Patrol over in Anvilmar, and my medic wants to know if we offer stink leave."

High Tinker Gelbin Mekkatorque sighed, pushed his glasses back onto his forehead, and slid his forefinger and thumb down along the sides of his own prominent nose. These new glasses hurt, and adjusting them was first on a list of thousands of tasks he planned to tackle when this engagement was through. He hadn't slept the night before, and the flesh where his lenses had perched was feeling raw and tender. Retaking Gnomeregan was turning out to be much more than a simple military action.

Take this stench, for instance. One of the problems with a vast subterranean mechanical city—one of hundreds, actually—was ventilation. At full capacity, the network of fans, vents, and filters had required a team of fifteen technicians working shifts around the clock to keep Gnomeregan smelling fresh and clean. Years of un-squeegee trogg funk had congealed into layers of musky, impenetrable grime that was proving harder to remove than the invaders themselves.

"Don't worry, Captain. I've got the whiz kids down in the Alchemy Corps prototyping my Unpungent Reekaway Cannons this week. Should help to blast that nasty smell from our halls. Why don't you and your squad take the rest of the day off, go grab some pints down at the Thunderbrew?"

The other gnome smiled, saluted, and gave a quick nod.

Mekkatorque turned back to the blueprints laid out on the table behind him and pulled his glasses back in place, wincing. While some sections of Gnomeregan were still being viciously contested, others had fallen into his hands with surprising ease. Of course, assistance from the Alliance had been catalytic in that respect, but Gelbin wasn't so sure. The Hall of Gears had seemed almost... abandoned. It was unlike his old enemy to surrender territory so easily.

Gelbin was interrupted by somebody clearing his throat, and turned again. The cog captain was still standing there, wringing his hands.

"I'm sorry, was there more, Captain?"

"Well, yes, High Tinker, sir. If you don't mind my asking..."

"Not at all. Speak up."

"Right, sir. It's just that some of the boys were wondering, and I was too, why we've been sent to reconnoiter that sector. I mean, it's nowhere near the front line and doesn't seem to hold any resources—or any real strategic value at all. Just looks like some crazy old geezer's library. Sir."

"An 'old geezer's library,' you say?"

Captain Winklespring smiled conspiratorially. "Ha, that was my impression anyway, sir—stacks of old books, crumpled papers, and something that looked like a coney burrow built out of pie tins—"

"Well, I suppose the Deeprun Tram scale mock-up *does* kind of look that way...."

"The... sir?"

"Those were my quarters, Captain."

"Your... your quarters, sir? Oh. *Oh*. My apologies, High Tinker. I didn't mean to—"

"Not quite what you'd expect for someone in my exalted station, eh?" Gelbin chuckled and leaned forward to pat the flustered captain on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Winklespring. I may have held a lofty seat in the Tinkers' Court, but all of my real working, thinking, and inventing was done in that crazy old geezer's library. Now, on your way out, would you let Sergeant Copperbolt know that I'm ready to survey the area? Thanks for your strong work, Captain."

...

Gelbin waited until his security team had turned and disappeared around the corner before he let the smile drop from his face. His shoulders slumped with a breathy exhalation that was both a sigh and a curse.

This was hard. Hard returning to his study. His nook. This was the place he'd pictured whenever he'd heard the word *home*, even after so many years away. Years living under the charity and forbearance of allies who, for all their noble sentiment, still looked upon him with pity.

The pity—ah, that was the hardest part. For a race of ambitious folk whose lives were validated by a masterful command of the scientific laws of the universe, to be pitied was unbearable. To be pitied was to be insulted. Gelbin chafed under the sympathy, and he knew that his people did too: as a leader, he had learned that it was wise to spare some thought for his own emotions since they often reflected what the rest of the gnomes felt, to some degree.

But the pity wasn't all, at least for the high tinker. Having to keep up the smile, the courageous cheer, and the gnomish wit in front of his people. Having had to project a constant and uninterrupted confidence in the tight quarters of old Tinker Town, when all he'd wanted to do was collapse to the ground and... and...

Gelbin took a shaky breath and staggered to the side, catching his shoulder against the metal wall with a dull thump. So many dead. *So many!*

Steeling himself, he clenched his fists and exhaled. He closed his eyes and counted prime numbers until the feelings retreated, once again, to that distant corner of his mind. Safe, reliable prime numbers. You could always depend on them. Trust them. Gelbin knew that he'd have to go back and deal with those feelings someday, but there was no time for that now. No time at all. The gnomes needed their high tinker at his best for the retaking of their homeland, and showing silly things like shame and regret would only seem like weakness. A wayfaring people who teetered on the brink of extinction could not afford a leader who displayed weakness.

At least, not again.

Shaking the thought from his head, Gelbin strode forward and began to assay the condition of his one-time home. Unlike his peers in the Alliance, the high tinker eschewed fancy living conditions in exchange for a *practical* abode. What use was a throne when you thought better on your feet? The well-worn network of hallways in sector 17 was a physical representation of Gelbin's creative process: library connected to drafting room connected to simple foundry connected to assembly chamber. Research, imagination, creation, engineering. This was where numbers had been rallied, partnered with iron, and sent marching forward. Literally.

These halls were where Gelbin had envisioned the first mechanostrider, which had allowed his diminutive people to match pace with the mighty human chargers. That creation had launched the young gnome's fame and set him on the path to leadership. The gyromatic micro-adjustor, the repair bot, the Deeprun Tram, even the prototype of the dwarven siege engine—all had begun as sketches and dreams in this study. All had been formed from the primordial ooze of Gelbin's imagination for the betterment of the gnomes.

"Which begs the question," he muttered, "can a hundred brilliant inventions make up for one terrible mistake?"

The darkness held his words, lined them with pain. Waiting for an answer that he already knew, the high tinker noticed something that made him smile for the first time since he had been down here. He was talking to himself. That was something he hadn't done since... well, since he had last lived in these tunnels. So maybe the returning neurosis was a good sign? Gelbin scratched at his neatly trimmed beard.

"If I'm finding hope in a psychotic relapse, things really *are* dire."

Moving through the assembly chamber, he ran a finger over a dusty bench and clicked his tongue. The years had not been kind. Even in the flickering light—its functioning illumination further testament to gnomish engineering—Gelbin could tell that his once-spotless study was going to need a serious and thorough squeegee.

He spied his trophy case against the far wall. It was something the high tinker had installed at the request of his apprentices, and only because he had needed someplace to put all these useless commendations. Like everything else, it was draped in a layer of dust.

The centerpiece of the large display was his first working mechanotrider prototype, standing proud and lanky amidst various medals and ribbons. Gelbin smiled, noting that even the latest, most advanced high-speed models hot from Ironforge still echoed the avian gait and kettle-bellied form of his original opus. What's more, he had heard reports from his agents in Northrend that the enigmatic mechagnomes had adopted his invention for their own mysterious purposes. What could be more flattering than having a race of machines use *your* machine to get around?

And while the mechanotrider had been the first (and arguably the most popular) of his inventions, the steady stream of unique, powerful, and violently practical creations that had issued from these halls had strengthened his people and proved the gnomes to be a vital asset to the Alliance of dwarves, humans, and elves. This was where Gelbin Mekkatorque had gone from mere inventor to high tinker of the gnomes. This was where Gelbin Mekkatorque had reached his greatest insights, birthed his most brilliant inventions, and received his brightest accolades from a people who celebrated creativity and craft above all else.

And this was where Gelbin Mekkatorque had foolishly trusted counsel from one he had considered a friend. This was where Gelbin Mekkatorque had sent the order that had killed most of his people, cost the survivors their homeland, and cast them into begging and ignominy.

He slammed a fist into the wall, raising a cloud of dust, and the lights overhead flickered in a visual echo of his frustration. The high tinker decided that he should just walk it off. He wandered from the assembly chamber to the foundry and then to the drafting room. Then he stopped. Gelbin suddenly realized, with some surprise, that he had just displayed his first sign of actual anger now, *years* after the betrayal. And it had felt good, this uncharacteristic act of rage.

Perhaps the dwarves were rubbing off on him. Or maybe being home again, finally out from under the eyes of pitying benefactors and worrying citizens, he felt as if the curtains were drawn and he didn't have to be high tinker. Here, finally, he could be Gelbin. And Gelbin could feel sad; Gelbin could feel betrayed; and Gelbin could feel furious and heartbroken about the damnable injustice of it all.

He growled and swung at the wall again, relishing the blunt pain in his knuckles and the satisfying clang that reverberated through the iron hallways around him. If nothing else, spending time with the dwarves had made his people stronger, more comfortable with their physical prowess than ever before in the gnomes' scholarly history. The dwarves had mastered the indelicate art of melee combat in a world made up of beings who were often more than double their stature, while the gnomes had generally focused on escaping and avoiding such conflict. But these years of hardship and survival amongst their burlier allies had, for better or for worse, given the gnomes a combatant edge. Gelbin saw more gnomes wielding swords, donning armor, and talking back to Tall Folk than ever before.

"Well," he mumbled, "the talking back hasn't helped our already shrinking numbers."

The ringing from his violent assault on the wall was still echoing through the room, and the high tinker caught himself mid-thought. That didn't sound right.

Gelbin cocked his head and took a step back. Sector 17 had been carved into the sturdy northwestern reaches of Dun Morogh—a portion of that snowy range consisting largely of granite and shale. The ironclad hallways in this wing of Gnomeregan shouldn't respond to percussive force with that sort of resonance. Was his memory faulty?

Gelbin rapped his knuckles against the wall again, eyes closed. Again, the ringing carried with an almost bell-like tone.

Without taking his eyes from the wall, Gelbin backed up to the center of the room. His old troll-made chair, a delightfully primitive construction of bone and raptorhide, still sat in its familiar spot. The chair was a souvenir from the first gnome-assisted Alliance foray into a Horde encampment during the Second War, and Gelbin had kept the fierce-looking thing to remind himself of two important points. First, that his enemies lived in a world shaped from monsters' flesh and bone. And second, that even tusked, mossy-skinned savages needed a cozy place to sit sometimes. Although the high tinker rarely sat still while caught up in his inventions, he had used the chair as a makeshift cot after countless late nights of brainstorming. Its low profile and wide expanse of padded leather, intended for the relatively substantial troll posterior, had made for a perfect gnome gnep. He collapsed back into his chair's welcome softness with a worried sigh.

Had there been some new construction in this area since the exodus? Gelbin's suspicions were heightened now. He scanned the drafting room, checking for any signs of sabotage: loose wiring, misplaced panels, or unknown footprints in the dust. This entire sector had been scrutinized by his most able crew, but Mekkatorque had learned not to trust blindly. Especially when Thermaplugg was involved.

Sicco Thermaplugg. The name still brought a cold tightness to his stomach, a tension that could not be reasoned away. Gelbin had finally conjured up a term for this odd sensation: it was a feeling he was severely, frighteningly unfamiliar with. It was *confusion*. In this one rare instance, High Tinker Gelbin Mekkatorque was still very, very confused.

How could it have happened?

A Gnomeregan gnome who acted against his kind was an impossibility, a fluke, an inconceivable aberration. Unlike the dwarves, the gnomes had no previous history of internecine violence. Theirs had been a past free of warlords and violent factions. Gnomes simply didn't fight gnomes. In a world of lions, tigers, furbolgs, and Tall Folk, his people had to rely on each other. It went without saying. That was why gnomes didn't need the primitive primogeniture that had caused so much bloodshed amongst other races of Azeroth, and had shifted away from monarchy centuries ago. Gnomes elected their leaders by common consent, based on the merits of their work. Merit that was entirely quantifiable in its benefits to the race. To act in a way harmful to one's kind, to lust after power in spite of the cost to one's people—that was something a dwarf would do, or an orc. It was undoubtedly human. But how could a *gnome* bring about the near extinction of the gnomes?

Sicco had claimed to have tested the radiation levels of the gas. He had claimed to have evidence of its terminal effects on the troggs, and he had shown Gelbin falsified numbers on its density and volumetric weight. The gas should have stayed in the quarantined thoroughfares and lower sections of Gnomeregan, poisoning the invaders as they emerged from the depths while the gnomes waited safely sealed away in the upper urban tunnels. At the time, this had seemed like the only way out of the unforeseen invasion, and it wouldn't require any help from the otherwise-occupied Alliance. The gnomes would take care of the gnomes. Thermaplugg had seemed so confident this stuff would do the trick.

But most of the troggs had just shambled through the gas, if anything, growing wilder as they became irradiated. And the gas had *risen* through Gnomeregan. It had sifted through Thermaplugg's vaunted Kleen Wind Domicilic Filters. And it had killed the gnomes who had sat waiting in their homes, choking on vile green clouds behind doors that the high tinker had promised would keep them safe. Gnomeregan had died that day. It had died because Gelbin Mekkatorque had trusted a friend to be a friend. Or at least to be a gnome.

Gelbin leaned back and closed his eyes. The tightness in his chest was almost painful, and for the millionth time he wondered if he should renounce his title and let somebody else be high tinker. Somebody less confused. Somebody who wouldn't make a fool mistake that would end up killing so many....

This time there was no holding back the despair, the thick wave of sorrow welling up from where it had been trapped for far too long. Gelbin took some quick breaths, counted

prime numbers, gripped tightly onto the seat of his chair. But there was no stopping it this time. The grief swept past his defenses, burst through his chest in a ragged, throaty sob.

And alone in the dark stone silence of his abandoned study, High Tinker Gelbin Mekkatorque finally wept.

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After the tears had dried, the trembling stilled, and the chill quiet returned to the room, Gelbin let out a shaky breath and straightened himself. He felt... empty... in a clean, hollowed-out sort of way. It wasn't a *good* feeling, exactly. But a much-needed one.

Time to get back to the surface, back to his people. He was already feeling selfish for taking so long with his own problems. Pushing down on the armrest, he started to rise.

And paused.

There was something cold under his hand. Gelbin opened his eyes and looked down. Folded neatly on the arm of his chair were his favorite spectacles, the simple mithril-rimmed lenses he had gotten as a gift when he had graduated from Gearshaft University. Strong, reliable, comforting. They had held a constant position on his face for decades since—a position that had only been interrupted by the trogg invasion and the gnomes' subsequent hasty departure. Gelbin had been making do with a new pair of glasses in the meantime, something he'd scrapped together in Ironforge in his spare time while running between Tinker Town and Bronzebeard's throne. It was a feat his poor nose had been lamenting ever since. Smiling, the high tinker reached down to retrieve his long-lost eyewear.

"Now I can get back to being myself—"

The glasses came off of the chair with an odd tension, and Gelbin froze. A cold memory slid from the back of his thoughts: these had been a graduation gift. A present from his friend and fellow graduate Sicco Thermaplugg.

And Gelbin would never have left his glasses sitting on the chair.

Too late, he noticed a thin wire wrapped around the nosepiece. It trailed down the side of the chair and into a tiny hole in the tile below, an almost invisible thread of metal. Truesilver, incredibly light but stronger than steel. Gelbin felt a small tug on the other end of the wire, the mechanical twitch of a released spring, and looked up just in time to see a heavy door slam shut over the entryway. There was a similar metallic clang in the exit hallway behind him.

New construction in sector 17? Apparently, there had been. Somebody had left a trap for the high tinker, and Gelbin had walked right into it. Who else would sit in this chair? Who would touch the high tinker's spectacles? As hidden gears grumbled behind the

hollow walls, Gelbin found himself wondering if Captain Winklespring had been paid off, or if his team really had missed this sabotage.

There was a crackling static sound, an electric speaker coming to life, followed by a voice that had haunted the high tinker's dreams for years.

"You know, dear Gelbin, I had wondered if this bait would be too obvious for you—almost didn't believe it when my alarm went off. It looks as if I can always rely on your charming naiveté to outweigh your intellect."

Gelbin leapt to his feet, wiping at his eyes. For a moment he had the childish worry that perhaps Sicco had seen him crying, but the high tinker quickly shrugged it aside. The empty feeling of a moment ago was now replaced with something colder. Fear. Shame. They echoed his confusion in painful harmony. Gritting his teeth, Gelbin reached down to the belt loop where he usually carried his trusty Wrenchcalibur. Nothing. In his rush to see his old study, he had come entirely unarmed.

This was another thing he never did, not even walking around Ironforge. Was he losing his mind? Confusion, forgetfulness, and now this.

In a funny way, Thermaplugg was right. The high tinker *had* suspected a trap down here, had sensed that this area had been relinquished too easily. But... but how could Sicco willingly waste such an incredible amount of time and resources just to kill a single gnome, when the entire Alliance was at his door? Again, confusing.

"*Focus, dammit!*" Gelbin whispered to himself. He was going to die down here if he didn't pull it together. The high tinker had never felt so out of sorts, but he couldn't let his old friend know that if he wanted to live. Perhaps verbal sparring would keep Sicco's famously one-track mind occupied while Gelbin figured a way out of here. He cleared his throat.

"Obviously I gave you too much credit as a tactician, Sicco. It's no wonder my forces have been able to make so much headway against your entrenched army, a throng that outnumbers us three to one: you've been wasting your time on silly revenge games."

Quickly assaying the chamber, Gelbin fought to maintain focus. If Thermaplugg decided to flood the place with the same toxic gas he'd used against his people, there would be no escape. Gelbin knew this room well enough to appreciate that. Only two doors, both of them sealed off. He lifted the front of his tunic up to his face, looking around for telltale signs of the deadly green mist. Perhaps he could hold his breath long enough to exit through whatever vent his enemy had constructed to deliver the vile stuff.

Sicco Thermaplugg was laughing.

"Silly revenge games"? Gelbin, do you have any idea what your death will do to the gnomes? They have kept you at the helm in spite of everything I've done to discredit you. The little fools love their high tinker. Your death is going to rip their hearts out."

Gelbin's reply was cut off by the click of a switch being thrown. Dead silence, and then a mechanical groaning, the sound of heavy iron cables straining against spring-powered wheels. The wall in front of him—the very wall he'd struck—began to lift up into the ceiling. There was a rush of warm, moist air, and Gelbin realized what form his assassination would take. It smelled like mold, mange, and sour monkey.

The trogg emerged from the shadows with a wet growl. Powerfully built, with muscular arms hanging almost to the floor, it moved with the confident swagger of a predator that knows its prey is trapped.

The high tinker had commanded engagements against these beasts before, but he had never been so close to one; his security team would never allow it (a team he had foolishly ordered to wait for him outside the sector). The trogg was easily twice Gelbin's size, and had a network of scars running across the pebbled skin of its chest. Jagged, bony protrusions slanted out from the creature's shoulders and elbows, deformed growths that bore testament to its rocky heritage. Gelbin had heard rumors that the troggs were a twisted branch of the dwarven race; although he would never admit it to his gracious hosts, he could see the similarity in the shaggy beard, stout form, and thick, cabled bands of muscle that seemed to have been carved from granite. But that was where the similarities ended. The trogg had a sloped, apelike posture, with the heavy browridges and pronounced canines of a predator.

Gelbin thought back to his combat training. One trogg was usually a match for four or five gnomes, assuming they were armed and experienced in subterranean warfare. A proven tactician himself, Mekkatorque knew that even without steam-powered armor and Wrenchcalibur at his side, he could still put up a decent fight. The gnome took a step forward and scanned the room. Maybe if he could get to the other side of the study quick enough, there would be a stool that could become a makeshift weapon. If he could keep the trogg at bay, perhaps he would be able to escape through the opening it had just come through. It would be risky, but it was the best—

Two more troggs shambled into the light. The first one grunted guttural commands to the other two, and they moved to either side of their prey with a feral swiftness that belied their bulk.

The wall lowered behind them with a foreboding clang, and Gelbin felt a sad clarity: he was going to die here. There was no way out of Thermanplugg's trap. Sicco was finishing the job he'd begun in the halls of Gnomeregan years before. The city would finally and unquestionably belong to the monster who pretended to be a gnome. Gelbin dropped to his knees and closed his eyes.

Over.

Done.

He was tired of the pity, tired of the daily reminders that he had lost his kingdom simply because he'd been a gnome. He was tired of the damned confusion. The shuffling sound of troggs grew near, and Gelbin Mekkatorque whispered goodbye to his beloved Gnomeregan. To his people.

*"The little fools love their high tinker."*

*After all of this, they love their high tinker.*

Gelbin opened his eyes and looked down. He saw that he still held his glasses, saw the razor-thin truesilver wire extending to the floor. Almost instinctively, his engineering mind took over, and imagined blueprints spread open across his vision.

The tripwire led to what was obviously a weighted spring trigger. This was linked to a heavy axle that was counterweighted by the cables that had lifted the wall on a pair of what had sounded like rusting iron hinges—Sicco had always been sloppy in his construction. The rest was fairly simple engineering, actually, and Gelbin found it ironic that even Sicco the un-gnome relied on gnomish technology to achieve his dark ends. A technology that Gelbin had adapted, that Gelbin had innovated, and that Gelbin had mastered for the protection and salvation of his people.

Gelbin Mekkatorque was a gnome in his flaws and in his triumphs. That was why his people loved him. That was why he was still high tinker. And that was why he was still fighting for the gnomes, even after so much shame, darkness, and confusion.

And suddenly he wasn't confused anymore.

Rolling to his side, Gelbin dodged the first trogg's fist as it barreled toward him. The creature's stony knuckles cracked into the tile floor, sending shards whistling past his ear. Gelbin was on his feet the next second, sprinting toward the back of the study. A plan was forming in his mind.

"So tell me, Sicco. If my death delivers such an obvious advantage to you, why wait until now? Wouldn't it have been much easier to kill me back when I trusted you?"

It was hard talking and running at the same time, but Gelbin knew he had to keep Thermaplugg distracted if this was going to work.

Thinking that their prey was moving to some hidden escape, the two troggs at his flanks charged ahead to block him. Gelbin had anticipated this, and he took the few seconds it granted him to reel in the remaining truesilver wire around his glasses.

The first trogg was almost upon him again, and Gelbin turned to run *directly at the* howling beast. It hadn't expected this, and lunged over empty air as Gelbin ducked, slid between its legs, rolled to his feet, and kept running.

Roaring, it turned and lumbered after him. The other two troggs, excited by their brother's noises, let out howls and circled around. They weren't dumb animals, Gelbin knew. They were content to let the first trogg tire him out, and then they'd move in for the easy meal. Sicco's voice sputtered overhead.

"What? You're not dead yet?"

Gelbin smiled as he ran. His opponent had just revealed that, while he could hear inside the chamber, he couldn't see what was transpiring. This just might work.

The angry trogg was fast—faster than Gelbin had imagined—and the gnome could feel its horrible breath on his neck. His own breath was coming in gasps, and Gelbin focused on the drafting table only a few more yards in front of him.

*Closer. Closer.*

With a sudden yelp, the trogg was yanked backward and sent crashing to the floor by some invisible force. The truesilver wire that Gelbin had looped around its ankle had reached its limit and, catching on the sturdy mithril spectacles at such a combination of weight and velocity, had severed the creature's foot from its leg. An anguished roar, part moan and part scream, shivered the air. The trogg lifted a spurting, ragged stump and bellowed again, pounding a fist on the ground. Mekkatorque gave it an apologetic wink and scurried to the drafting table just ahead. One of the troggs moved toward the fallen creature, more curious than concerned, while the other continued circling Gelbin.

Angry mumbles came from the speaker hidden above.

"You're right, Gelbin. I *should* have killed you back then, but I needed a scapegoat. I needed somebody to rally the gnomes against as they elected me the new high tinker. Do you realize how much time I spent concocting a plan that would spoil your name? Killing you would have been easy!"

Gelbin had reached the table, and he began pulling out drawers in a frantic search. He covered his actions with an almost conversational tone.

"So when does the part about rallying the gnomes and becoming high tinker start? Was that supposed to happen before or after the genocide?"

Sicco growled, cursed, and there was the distinctive sound of a wrench bouncing off a wall. Gelbin was getting to him.

"Any idiot can sound wise in hindsight! The gas was more... efficacious than I had hoped. My calculations showed a thirty percent mortality rate, a statistically meaningful number of corpses—all laid at your feet. That, followed by my impressive dismissal of the troggs, would have ensured a speedy coup."

Gelbin saw his opening. "'*Would have*' being the operative phrase here...."

Another crashing sound—this time what could only have been a fist against the microphone.

"Who could have calculated that the gnomes would still follow you after I had practically painted your hands with their blood? That they would disregard logic and act like a bunch of weepy, emotional night elves? I'm glad the gas did what it did! The gnomes needed this purge!"

The next sound was similar to the last, only louder and followed by a roar of static. Then silence. Apparently Sicco Thermaplugg hadn't factored melee damage into his microphone durability template. Gelbin looked up from his rummaging and nodded.

"Temper, temper. You've just lost your ability to gloat from long distance, my friend."

He bent down and went back to work. Luckily, Thermaplugg had been careful to leave most of the study undisturbed to avoid alerting the high tinker's specialists. In fact, Gelbin suspected that most of this trap had been built elsewhere and installed behind the walls and under the flooring. The only traceable intrusion had been that damned wire.

And that damned wire had just reduced his problems by 33.3 percent (repeating, of course). Gelbin found what he was looking for at the bottom of the last drawer. It was a little leather satchel holding a set of tools that his assistants had used to service the clocks scattered around the study. Punctuality had never been one of his strong suits, but he liked knowing exactly how late he was going to be.

The gnome turned to get his attackers' bearings, and dodged another vicious blow. One of the troggs had tried to sneak up on him, and its fist burst through the table behind Gelbin as though it were made of matchsticks. He had always suspected that these creatures had heavy minerals in their physiology, and the havoc that they'd wreaked on the floor and furniture in the last few minutes had confirmed that.

Again, the gnome's speed was his advantage, and he scurried from the beast with satchel in hand. The trogg roared in anger, then turned to growl commands to its brethren. One monster was bleeding its life out on the tiles, but the other grunted assent and moved slowly across the room. They were going to trap Gelbin between them and then move in for the kill. The high tinker couldn't run forever. It was only a matter of time, and they knew it.

The gnome had returned to the center of the room, where his chair still lay, tipped over on its side. The dying trogg had yanked the wire with the full force of its heavy, running body and dislodged the trigger housing that had been buried just below the tiles beneath the seat. It was a square metal box about the size of a dinner plate. And if Sicco Thermaplugg had done the same sort of sloppy, goblin-esque engineering that Gelbin had seen him use before, the main spring axle and counterweights would be directly under that.

Gelbin pushed the chair aside and opened up his satchel. A wrench, an iron hammer, a file, and a white vial of blackmouth oil for lubricating springs—all miniature, just the size for working with clocks. Or for sabotaging some sabotage. He glanced up, estimating the time before the troggs would close in. Maybe twenty seconds. He'd need thirty.

Uncorking the vial, he spilled its contents and then rolled it across the tile in a glistening line toward the nearest trogg. The creature looked down at the little flask, chuffed in simian amusement, and looked up to see the gnome pull out a tiny wrench in one hand and a file in the other. In one quick motion, Gelbin brought the edge of the wrench down along the length of the file. A bright line of sparks arced to the ground and caught onto the oil trail, which flowed in a fiery snake to the vial at the trogg's feet. It had happened so quickly that the creature barely had time to turn aside as a ball of fire blossomed underneath it. The shaggy hair on its beard caught fire, and the trogg began frantically beating at itself with knobbed knuckles. This only served to fan the flames.

Satisfied, Gelbin turned back to the wire, broken tile, and dislodged trigger housing at his feet. The other trogg was still across the room, and it was moving much more cautiously now that its companion had just been set ablaze by an unarmed gnome.

"Thirty seconds now," mumbled the high tinker. "Maybe forty."

He used the wrench to open the trigger housing and then located the trigger mechanism at the base of the truesilver spool. Sure enough, Sicco had been sloppy. A good saboteur would have made sure that the trigger was a one-time-only construction, through either single-use materials or low-tensile springs. The spring on this spool was still wound enough for a few more uses, and Gelbin quickly attached the trigger to the counterweight switch, an oblong combination of cogs that allowed the trick wall to move up and down by managing the cables connected to a separate massive spring wound around an axle directly beneath his feet. With the trigger attached, he set the switch to the side and reached down into the space below where the trigger housing had been. The wrench flashed as Gelbin speedily removed the restraining bolts that held the axle securely in place.

There were four rusty bolts in total, and it took Gelbin the remaining time to get three of them free. Metal groaned as the massive weight that had been borne by an entire frame now leaned on a single corroded bolt.

Gelbin raised himself up from his work just as the trogg grabbed him, yanking the gnome into the air. It pulled Mekkatorque close and grinned a ragged grin: its patience had been rewarded. The high tinker was inches away from cracked, boulder teeth, teeth spotted with the remains of whatever poor creature had last been held this close. Gelbin shrank back with a grimace.

"Winklespring was right—I *can* taste that smell."

The trogg roared, and the high tinker was spattered with saliva.

Then Gelbin smashed his fist into the trogg's mouth, shattering the front teeth and driving pieces of bone into the back of its throat. The trogg dropped him and staggered backward with a gurgling cry. Gelbin shook the blood off his hand, then opened it to reveal the iron hammer.

"Word of advice, friend. Never let a gnome near your teeth."

The trogg wiped the gore from its mouth, then turned as the other trogg arrived, blisters on its scorched skin. The two creatures were enraged, and Gelbin knew that he was seconds away from being torn apart. He took a step back and pressed down on the hastily constructed trigger.

Underground weights shifted; cables pulled taut; and a single rusty bolt snapped under the pressure. The tiles beneath the troggs' feet burst apart as a cable ripped up through the ground, pulling the axle behind it in an eruption of rock and metal. It sent the beasts flying backward to crash against the mangled desk, while simultaneously lifting the trick wall behind the high tinker.

His foes were down, and the exit was clear. It was time to leave. Gelbin turned to go, tucking the tools into his belt. For a second he paused and actually debated going back for his old glasses. He could see them across the room, still tied to the grotesque remnant of a trogg foot by a length of wire. Still intact. Still good. His hand automatically went up to his nose, rubbed the tender spot where the new glasses chafed.

"No, no," Gelbin said to himself, shaking his head. "They served their purpose. And I've got to get out of here."

Only he had waited too long. Now there were more troggs coming through the exit. Dozens of them. They crowded through the opening and circled around Gelbin, growling and snarling and licking their craggy teeth. He was out of ideas, and doubted that the troggs would be so kind as to lift him and his bloody hammer fist up to their faces.

But the troggs weren't advancing. They were waiting.

"I suppose I owe you an apology, Gelbin. I underestimated your boldness—should have sent *four* troggs."

The high-pitched laughter that followed was unnerving. From the sound of it, Sicco Thermaplugg had only fallen deeper into madness down here with these monsters. There was a clanging sound, the hiss of a steam engine, and Sicco appeared.

The mekGINEER had created a new battle suit for himself. Gelbin had heard reports of Sicco driving some massive cauldron-shaped thing through the bowels of Gnomeregan these past few years, but this was something altogether different. An agile contraption, the human-sized construct strode past the waiting troggs with a hiss of hot vapor. Welded from malleable, decorative metals, it resembled one of those fancy human suits of armor made for parades and showing off to the commoners—only with Sicco's wrinkly little head poking out of the collar. The demented gnome had aged poorly in the last few years, and Gelbin barely recognized his old friend. Hollow cheeks, thin strands of white, cobweb hair, and the sickly green tinge that spoke of radiation and lunacy.

Sicco saw Gelbin's pitying look and took it for appreciation. Grinning, he spun in a tight circle and then bowed with a flourish.

"Impressive bit of engineering, isn't it? You know, I did several test runs with a more practical battlefield prototype, but it proved far too bulky... and susceptible to explosions. This suit is much more stable in that regard, much more appropriate for my station."

"Your station?"

"Of course. It is only fitting that the king of the gnomes see eye to eye with the other rulers of the land. A difficult concept for a puny failure like you to grasp, I know."

Gelbin frowned. "The king of the gnomes, huh? So you've given up on winning an election, I presume. That's probably for the best, since the electorate might have a hard time voting for a candidate who's not a gnome."

Sicco looked startled for a second, and there was a hiss. The high tinker wasn't sure if the sound had come from the boiling steam engine in the belly of Sicco's suit, or if it had been an actual reptilian reply from his would-be usurper. Regardless, the noise fit Thermaplugg's scowl.

"I think begging for scraps at the dwarven table has driven you a little batty, Gelbin. Not a gnome? I am ten times the gnome you will *ever* be! While you sat back and coasted on your phony, unpredictable 'genius,' I was the one who had to actually *work* for recognition. Who spent weeks designing all the ballistic workings for your siege engines? I turned your lumbering metal beet truck into a mobile cannon! That work cemented our alliance with the dwarves. And did I get even a shred of thanks?"

Gelbin sighed. "Sicco, you were one of the brightest gnomes in Dun Morogh, and you seem to have forgotten that I was always very vocal about my gratitude for your work. You had creative, even brilliant ideas. But you were too sloppy. Too rough in your estimates and too quick in your refinement. I assigned you to ordnance design in hopes

that you would step up to the task. But your ballistic calculations would have detonated my siege engines as they reloaded. I spent long hours reworking your figures before sending them off to Ironforge."

"What? Lies! If my work was so shoddy, then why let *me* take credit for the guns?"

"Because," said Gelbin, "you were my friend."

Sicco Thermaplugg took a step back, eyes wide. For a moment, his face softened into something resembling the bright young gnome whom Gelbin had befriended years ago. The gnome he had helped graduate from school, employed at his foundry, and lifted to a prominent role in the Tinkers' Court in spite of worrisome and increasingly flawed performance. Sicco blinked several times and brought a metal hand up to rub his forehead.

"Gelbin, I... I..."

And then he noticed the hand, the powerful gilded fingers that *he alone* had created. He brought the hand up as a fist, and Sicco's face twisted into a lunatic grin. Gelbin's friend was gone.

"Well, that soggy weakness is exactly why I decided to take the reins from you. The gnomes should be dominating this land with our unstoppable weapons, not trading them away to imbecilic allies. That's what goblins are for!"

The high tinker shook his head.

"You never really understood, did you? It is our loyalty to our friends that provides our truest, greatest strength. This is what separates us from the ogres and troggs—and even the goblins. This is why the dwarves helped us back from near extinction, even surrendering a portion of their hallowed halls for us to call home. And this is why there are dwarves, humans, draenei, and night elves dying alongside us in the surrounding tunnels to reclaim a city that was never theirs. They are here because they are our friends, Sicco. My friends. It is a power that numbers cannot match."

The mekgineer hissed—this time Gelbin was positive the sound had come from the gnome's puckered mouth—and marched forward. "Why don't you just close your eyes and let me end this embarrassment?"

Stopping just in front of the high tinker, Sicco shook his head, raised his hand, and waved goodbye. The hand made a ratcheting sound, rotated in a complete circle, and then disappeared into the steel wrist of the battle suit's armor. Thermaplugg chuckled and brought the arm forward. With another burst of steam, a vicious blade emerged from the cuff—a blade that began to glow red with mechanical heat. Gelbin stumbled backward into the axle, feeling the tensely wound spring against his spine. He still had the wrench in his belt, and he lifted it to parry Sicco's blade. This elicited another chuckle.

"Oh, dear. You look so precious down there. Is this how the dwarves taught you to fight?"

"No," said Gelbin, twirling the wrench in his fingers. "This is how a gnome fights. Watch your head."

He turned and tapped the wrench against the catch holding the spring in place—a catch that had been supported by the framework below. Now it swung down with a clank, releasing the spring to whip free of the axle, a sharp steel blur whistling through the room as a massive store of pent-up energy was discharged in seconds. Gelbin felt a tremendous whoosh of motion slashing over his head, and then... stillness.

He pivoted and looked back. The troggs still stood there, drooling. Sicco let out another giggle.

Three lonely hairs that had been previously growing on the crown of Gelbin's head slowly fell down in front of his eyes.

Followed by the head of every trogg in the room.

And finally, by the bisected torso of Sicco Thermaplugg's battle suit. With a hot gush of steam, the top half slid free and crashed to the ground just in front of Gelbin, rolling to a stop face up against his leg. The occupant swallowed once and blinked repeatedly.

Sicco was surprised.

Sicco was... confused.

"M-my legs are in that half," Sicco said, pointing at the still-standing portion of the suit.

High Tinker Gelbin Mekkatorque nodded and leaned down to pat him on his mechanized shoulder.

"Indeed they are, my friend. And with a razor-quick spring cut and steam cauterization from your ruptured engine, the bleeding is probably minimal. I'd wait around to see if the rats find you before your trogg minions do, but I've seen enough of the latter for one day."

"You're just... just going to leave me here?"

"You don't deserve a quick death, Sicco. You deserve a long, miserable existence in a dark hole, surrounded by filthy monsters."

Gelbin took a step back with a sad smile. He spread his arms to encompass all of fallen Gnomeregan around them. "In fact, you have created your very own prison right here.

Better than any I could have built for you. You definitely outdid me on this one. Congratulations."

Sicco Thermaplugg blinked. He stammered. Gelbin relished the rare opportunity to look down on his enemy. He could hear the sound of more troggs approaching through the opening, and knew it was time to go.

"Besides, if you *do* survive, I can't think of anybody I'd rather have leading these beasts than one of their own." He bent forward and sniffed the top of Sicco's head, wrinkling his nose with distaste.

"Enjoy your remaining time in jail, my friend. Your sentence is almost over."

And with that, Gelbin left his study to head back toward New Tinkertown, leaving Sicco alone, helpless, and thoroughly bisected in the dark.

The trogg infestation was still going to take time and effort to cleanse. A comprehensive squeegee job on these stinking hallways had just been bumped up in priority, and the high tinker was already envisioning plans for a more open, airy layout. This "dark hole" was due for a remodeling the likes of which even the titans had never seen, not just for a return to its former glory, but for something far better. Far brighter. Far more fitting for the gnomes of Azeroth. Gelbin removed his new glasses and sighed, running his fingers down the bridge of his nose. A few upgrades, a few improvements—he could get used to these after all.