

A Clockwork Murder

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A note about this book (this is just the history, feel free to skip it):

Years ago, I got fed up with fantasy novels, so I wrote my own. It was a great learning process, but the novel needed a lot of work. At the same time, I switched my reading to mysteries and thrillers. Then I discovered National Novel Writing Month. Hmm, it was only a month, why not write a murder mystery in a fantasy world...and poke fun at the fantasy genre at the same time? Thus was born *A Clockwork Murder*.

Ten drafts and a year later, it was ready to shop around. I went to conferences, pitched to agents and editors, sent out query letters, networked, the whole bit. I wound up with six requests for chapters and full manuscripts. I was thrilled with my success. Unfortunately they all eventually declined. But they all wrote nice letters explaining why. All the letters agreed: "I like it, but I'm not sure I could sell it."

I spent a year shopping it around, and then I reassessed the situation: go back and rewrite the novel or move on to something new? It was time to move on, and besides, I liked the story how it was. So instead of spending another year changing this novel into something more marketable and then resubmitting it, I moved on to new novels.

I decided to release this one for free so I can track how many people download it and what feedback they give. If the results are good, I'll dig up the sequel and polish it. If not, I'll keep writing sequels for my own enjoyment, but I'll focus my effort on my more marketable ideas.

I think you'll enjoy it. If you do (or don't), please email your thoughts to todd@toddedwards.com. If you have trouble reading the files or need it in a different format, let me know. If you want to convert it to a new format, send me a copy and I'll post it here and credit you (I may even make you a character in a future book).

Please tell other people about the book. Send them to the website, give it to them, etc. I'm keeping track of how many downloads and hits I get. I have a rough draft of

a sequel and several more planned for the series. If I get a good enough response, I'll have a better chance of publishing those.

Thanks,
--Todd

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Summary

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Dedication

To everyone who encouraged me to write it and then spend the many hours polishing it.

The smell of death permeated the room. Its particular odor mixed and mingled with the other smells of the workshop: brass, oil, sulfur, and various chemicals, but overlaying it all was the metallic smell of blood. Fudnottin, my friend, had his own signature odor, so I knew without looking that his was the body under the sheet in the middle of the room.

The room was a typical workshop except for the gnome-sized body that lay in the middle of a pool of blood. Shop tables piled high with gears, springs, and hand tools dominated the center of the room. Molded sections of sheet metal lay scattered about underneath the tables, waiting to become the skins of future creations. Spattered drops of blood and bits of gore coated it all.

An unfinished clockwork--a humanoid machine made of a steel frame, rubber tubing, and brass gears--stood over the body like a statue. Blood covered the thing's claw-like hands and painted its front. Those soulless machines that can appear so alive have always disturbed me, but seeing one covered in blood and standing over its victim like a barbarian at a pig roast triggered a primal sense of fear.

I stood there stunned by the scene. The sight of a dead friend pulled me back to my adventuring days when death was so common that you never allowed yourself to get close to anyone. I thought I'd left that life behind me when I retired to the city, but apparently I had been wrong.

I had known that something was amiss when I came in. Never mind the Watchmen guarding the door, but I had smelled it. Too much metallic odor, too much chemical odor, as if Fudnottin's death had amplified everything.

And to think, today I would have cleared my debt to old Fud--although it's kind of hard to put a price on having an affair with your friend's wife.

#

Something solid crashed down on my shoulder like a side of beef. As a gnome, I was only three and a half feet tall, so a side of beef could make a noticeable impact. Fortunately, I used to live a life of adventure, and I could still take a hit without going down. But I'd be sore the next day.

I was also impulsive. I blamed my parents. They would have thought it perfectly fine for me to have talked my way past the Watchman at the front door and then walked into the middle of an investigation to see what was going in. The side of beef, who turned out to be a half-ogre Watchman, apparently was of a different opinion.

He grabbed my shoulder and hauled me back from the doorway so violently that I lifted off the ground. It may have been more abrupt than he intended, since half-ogres are strong and gnomes are light. I may act tough, but I didn't have the sheer mass to back up my attitude.

"Hey, shorty! You can't go in there!"

Being heaved into the air like an unruly puppy broke the spell of death and brought me to my senses. Damn Watchman thinks he can muscle me around? I swung my trusty fighting cane up to crack the brute on the knuckles. A meaty crunch told me I aimed true, and my butt hitting the floor told me he'd let go.

Being close to the ground has some advantages in a fight, mainly that I can get up fast. The Watchman still rubbed his hand when I shoved the business end of my cane in his face.

"Touch me again and I'll stop playing nice. Now, who are you? Who's in charge here? What's going on? Why wasn't I informed?"

Half-ogres weren't just slow to move; my rapid questions and the cane waving in his face distracted him. It must have been too much for his simple brain to sort out, so he decided to treat me like a VIP instead of the random-guy-walking-into-his-crime-scene that I was.

"I'm Watchman Serge, sir. Investigator Tillman is in charge. He's in the kitchen."

"Well? Let's go. Take me to him. I haven't got all day!"

I left my delivery cart sitting in the workshop doorway, forgotten for now. Fud wouldn't need the bottles of custom hydraulic fluid I'd crafted for him anytime soon.

As we walked, I smoothed the wrinkles out of my clothes and brushed off the dust. If I'd known I'd be tossed around today, I would have worn something more appropriate, maybe leather. Silk was not meant to take such a beating. At least my spectacles survived the tussle. The maker had charged far too much to infuse the glass with a plum colored dye, but it had been worth it to have glasses that contrasted my white hair.

Serge kept rubbing his hand as he walked me over to the living area of Fud's building. I knew where the kitchen was, of course, but it would look better if the Watchman escorted me in.

Nerni sat at the table, which was built out of an old gear the size of a wagon wheel. She was my friend, Fud's wife, and my former lover--though not in that chronological order. Her green hair hung limp around her shoulders except where it stuck out at odd angles. Clearly the morning hadn't been good for her and she would have been tugging at it furiously. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were red and puffy, which clashed with her peridot-colored irises. I could see tracks where tears had recently rolled down her pale skin.

She wore her traditional canvas overalls that had been stained beyond repair by years of working on greasy machines. The white shirt underneath was free of grime at least. She must have dressed up for the Watchmen since she didn't bother anymore for me, and Fud preferred the mechanic look.

Five cogs away from her sat a human who must have been Investigator Tillman. He sat in one of the few chairs big enough for a human and didn't seem uncomfortable in the gnomish surroundings.

He dressed conservatively, which I guess is part of the job of an investigator for the City Watch. Typical Watchmen want to stand out in a crowd so everyone knows they're there. The investigators preferred to blend in, though I could still see hints of the yellow and blue of the City Watch. Judging by the shoddy tailoring of his tunic and overcoat, he must blend well into fashion unconscious neighborhoods like Fud's.

The wooden butt of a pistol poked out of his coat. Showing off a weapon in polite company is a faux pas, but when you are The Authority, you probably have to remind everyone how tough you are. Tillman drummed his fingers on the wood, which had been stained to a shade as dark as his skin, keeping track of the time. He probably had to sit with the distraught witnesses for a set number of minutes before he could escape and go back to his work.

As I entered, Tillman shot me a look that didn't make me feel welcome, and then he gave a nastier look to Serge. At least the heat was off me.

When Nerni saw me, she cried and rushed over to hold me. Or maybe I held her. By mutual agreement, it had been a long time since we'd been in each other's arms, but today the rules had drowned in a pool of blood. But it wasn't like that.

"Oh, Zook. Fud . . . he's . . ."

"Shhh, I know. Take it easy, Nerni."

Tears flowed for several minutes, accompanied by full-body sobs. Each shudder reminded me that she had never had to get used to death. While she cried, I stared at the cooking contraptions around the room. Fud had probably built them himself; he loved to tinker with anything he could get his hands on. Now Nerni would have to carry on his projects.

Nerni was a private woman, so she probably hadn't cried much once the Watchmen had arrived. Now she let it all out. Investigator Tillman continued to watch me, but he let Nerni have her time to grieve. We shared a look, one of those guy moments that we use so that we don't have to actually say things out loud, and he took Serge out into the entry hall to give Nerni and me some privacy. When she had cried herself out, we talked.

"What happened to him?" I tried to be gentle, but there was no easy way to say it. I thought she would lose it again, but she managed to speak in short bursts between her sobs.

"He was having a breakthrough last night and decided to work late. He never came to bed, but you know how he is when he's on a roll. When I got up this morning, I didn't hear anything from the shop, so I figured he had fallen asleep at his bench again. I made a pot of coffee, and when I brought it in to him, I . . . I . . . found . . ." She was holding up well despite the situation, but she couldn't talk more about what she found in the workshop.

"What does the investigator think happened? Did he say anything?"

"He thinks the prototype malfunctioned and killed Fud. He thinks it was all just an accident!" She lowered her face to her hands and wept. "Zook, I don't know how that could have happened."

"It was a prototype. Lots of things could have gone wrong with it."

"No, you don't understand. He was working on the control mechanism, just the core, not the rest of it. All the hydraulic parts were inoperable when I left him, and we'd drained the fluid so we'd be ready to test your new batch today. Even if someone powered it up, it couldn't have moved. There is no possible way the prototype clockwork could have activated."

"Did you tell the investigator all that?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what did he say?"

"That idiot doesn't understand the first thing about clockworks. He thinks I'm just being hysterical and he won't listen to me. Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

"I'll try, but if it wasn't an accident, what do you think happened?"

"I don't know what went on last night, but I do know it wasn't an accident." Her anger distracted her from her pain. I guess that was a good thing.

I told her I would see what I could do with the investigator. He waited right outside the kitchen, just like I knew he would. As soon as I came out, he pulled me out of earshot.

"Listen, mister." He poked his bony digit towards my face, but it was all a tough-guy act. I'd seen plenty of people like him back in my adventuring days. They always call you "mister" when they want to make you think they're more important than they really are. "I can see you're a friend of Mrs. Hodgewinkle, so I'll let it go this time, but if you ever barge in on my business again, I'll throw you in the dungeon myself." Great, he took it personally. "Now tell me who you are and why you're here."

"I'm Zook Terpin. I'm an alchemist, and these people are my friends and colleagues. I came to deliver an order. Is that enough information for you?" He kept his gaze locked on me while he wrote in his little leather notebook--a skill that always disturbed me. He nodded to himself when he finished writing and then launched into a series of background questions about me, my work, what I knew about Fudnottin, and so on.

Fudnottin Hodgewinkle was a fellow gnome scientist, though he was more of a visionary clockwork inventor--a clocksmith--and I was more of a pay-the-bills alchemist. If you owned any sort of clockwork helper or toy, chances were that Fud had designed some of the parts. I couldn't stand the things myself, but hey, Fud had hired me to develop an innovative hydraulic fluid, so I managed to hide my prejudices away in that mental abyss reserved for repressed feelings and naughty thoughts about Spiritual Collective officials.

I'd made many batches of fluid over the past few months and I'd only charged Fud for the materials. I didn't tell Tillman why, but when I started on the project, I made it clear to Fud that I'd call it an even trade to pay off my old debt to him for having had an affair with Nerni. This batch was to have been the last, and I was about to ramp up production and charge full price. No need to burden the investigator with ancient history.

I did tell him that I lived at my alchemy shop over in Downsfield, that I delivered fresh batches of fluid about once a week, and that I saw Fud and Nerni socially. I told him that they worked together and spent most of their time designing and building clockworks of all sorts. They had a good business, and everyone who knew them liked them.

Once my answers satisfied Tillman, I asked a few questions of my own.

"So what happened? Nerni doesn't think it was an accident or malfunction."

He was a bit friendlier now that he had his questions out of the way and since I had been so forthcoming. I had nothing to hide, so why wouldn't I be? "It

looks like it was a malfunction. We'll have to go through the evidence, but the doors were all locked from the inside. If it wasn't an accident, then she would be the only suspect, and she doesn't seem the guilty type. She said something about hydraulics and how it couldn't have been a clockwork malfunction, but that thing has blood on its hands, or claws, or whatever they are. It looks like it grabbed Mr. Hodgewinkle and ripped him apart. Look, industrial accidents happen all the time. It's sad, but not criminal. If you play around with steam powered machines enough, you're gonna get burnt. I'll send a mortician to make sure, but it's pretty clear the machine killed him. Case closed."

I explained what little I knew about hydraulics and how the thing wouldn't be able to move without fluid in the system. He took more notes but wore that glazed-over expression usually found on guests at parties who ask me about what I do. People take potions for granted and can't live without my products, but no one really cares about how they're made.

"That's interesting information." His eyes were still unfocused, so I knew it was an automatic response. "Like I said, if the mortician tells me the clockwork killed him, then that's all there is to it. I have to go now, but Watchman Antonio will be here, until the mortician arrives." He stopped and turned halfway through the door. "Say, what do you know about hate mail?"

"What, the out-of-work grunts from the Labor Guild who threaten to shoot us full of arrows the next time we step out of our home or those religious crackpots who write every week or so to tell us how we'll burn for eternity? Yeah, Fudnottin and Nerni got them. So do all the other clocksmiths and the artisans who sell to them." The Labor Guild thinks clockworks steal too many jobs and the Spiritual Collective frowns on artificial life, as they call it. The clocksmiths think of their creations as fancy machines, but ever since they started making clockworks that resemble animals and people, the Collective has pronounced the machines to be sacrilegious. "You remember how they hounded all those magi who animated golems, right? Well, now they're targeting the clocksmiths. So that means we all have to deal with the hate mail and protesters."

"So you don't think any of them had anything to do with his death?"

I thought about it for a moment. The religious nuts would harass and annoy, but the believers who lived in Erona were generally harmless. The real fanatics tended to live in the less civilized parts of the world. The Spiritual Collective was too concerned with maintaining its political power to get involved with violence over one, albeit influential, clocksmith.

The Labor Guild's members occasionally vandalized clockworks, but even they weren't so dumb as to kill such a prominent technologist as Fud. Despite all the bad feelings about technology floating around, I couldn't see any of them escalating to murder. If they were capable of murder, they would have done it long ago. The more I thought about it, the less sense it all made. Nerni was convinced that it was no accident, but that was the simplest explanation.

"Nah. Well, maybe, but who would know? They've always been relatively peaceful, despite what they write. We used to have a contest each week for the

craziest letter. The winner got a free dinner, but after a while the fun wore off and we stopped paying attention to the letters."

"Ah, probably nothing then. Just the same, Nerni gave us a stack of recent letters. We'll catalog them in case anything comes up."

With that, he yelled for Serge to get going. They left and I heard him talk to the Watchman out front. I wanted to check out the prototype, but figured I should see to Nerni first.

She was still upset. So I told her what a good man Fud had been and said I understood what she was going through. She wasn't in the mood to talk. I didn't want to upset her more by forcing it, so I helped her up to her room, and told her I'd stick around to take care of the Watchmen while she rested.

Once I got Nerni settled in her room and had time to breathe, reality rolled in on me like the morning fog, obscuring the world around me, forcing me to work my way through it. I had to stay strong for Nerni. My friend was dead, and I didn't want to think about it. I couldn't help myself, though.

A clockwork had killed Fud. I'd never really trusted those machines; they were too complicated. I can't understand them, and that makes me a bit afraid. I suppose I'm no different than everyone else who fears the unknown. At least with orcs and dragons you know what motivates them, even if you don't understand why anyone would have such a strong desire to plunder villages and hoard treasure. Clockworks are like golems. They don't have any desires, so you never know what they might do. It all depends on how their maker put them together.

But we all would have to get used to them sooner or later, I supposed. Every week more of the metal beasts wandered out onto the streets and into shops and homes around the City. That's progress for you. Eventually, the long, steel arm of technology would reach across the entire city of Erona and anyone who failed to adapt would be pushed aside. Already, a steam-powered train clacked its way throughout the newer districts. It was only a matter of time before people got used to faster travel and demanded that rails be laid in the older parts of town.

The transition to technology wouldn't be an easy one. For now, there were just protests, general grumbling, and the occasional vandalism. How long would it take for some to be so opposed to the progress that they decided to get violent? Could Fud's death be the first? Would the rise of technology be a bloody revolt or an enlightened golden age? Would those of us in the middle survive?

Well, that was an easy question, for me at least. I'd learned how to take care of myself back in the good old days. I'd fought my way through tombs filled with restless undead, joined forces with other adventurers to slay giants and dragons, and lived amongst the orc tribes. Yeah, I knew that I'd survive technology. As long as I wasn't too out of shape from living the good life in the city.

But what about Nerni?

She didn't have my experience. She'd never had friends and lovers die at the hands of some beast. She'd never had to shove away her feelings and fight on. Would she survive? She would, if I had anything to do about it. There was no way I would let anything happen to her.

As I said, we'd been lovers, once, back before I met Fud. I'd like to say she duped me into thinking she was single, but I knew what I was getting into. He was on the road a lot, they'd been having troubles, and they were both seeing other people. It seemed innocent enough as these things go, but then he returned and I discovered that she hadn't been completely honest when she said they had an agreement to see other people. Fud and I got along famously, so I felt bad enough to come clean. He took it well, though from what I could gather, after that their marriage became more of a business alliance than a union of love. Sure, they cared for one another, but they were just close friends--husband and wife in name only. To keep up appearances and preserve their reputations in the clocksmith community,

they remained faithful. We were all close friends now, though there was still a bit of sexual tension between Nerni and me.

No, I owed it to Fud to take care of Nerni, and even if not for my old debt I wouldn't leave a friend like Nerni to fend for herself. Especially if someone might have caused the "accident". Nerni wouldn't be able to defend herself if someone came after her. She wasn't a retired adventurer like me. Or like Braenoic.

Ah, Braenoic. A more thoughtful gnome might raise an eyebrow at the fact that thinking of my romantic past with Nerni made me think of my old adventuring partner, but I'm not usually that thoughtful. I hadn't seen her in years, and in fact, I hadn't seen any of my old group since the last reunion.

Braenoic and I had been close partners--but not like that, you don't get involved with the people in your group, everyone knows that unwritten rule. She was the kind of person who became your best friend as soon as you met. She came into my life when I was new to the whole adventuring thing and was out looking for trouble. A typical kid.

My career started at an inn where I'd heard you could find a group pretty easily. It was a sort of gathering place, a jumping-off point for adventure. Heroic types packed the room, filling every chair and barstool, which was intimidating to an easily squashed gnome like me. But what a place! You had everything from your knights in shining armor with honest-to-god wings on their helmets to your cloaked rogues hiding under deep cowls in the shadows. From barbarian priestesses with bones in their hair to elegantly dressed gaunt figures with arcane staves and spell books. Humans, elves--back before their fall from grace--gnomes, dwarves, and ogres. Every race you could imagine. For me, the inn was a dream come true. Until about the fourth or fifth day.

The inn had seemed a likely place to find a group, what with all the tales of glory and boasts of treasure. I made the rounds, beer in hand, looking for work and hawking my wares, but I never got any takers. I thought perhaps I just didn't understand the routine. I would sit at the bar for hours, watching the action, trying to understand the code words the more experienced adventurers used, but the secret eluded me. Nearly a week I spent with no luck, and then I decided that there was no secret code. They had no routine, and in fact the crowd never really changed, which meant that no one actually went out on adventures. Mystery solved.

The inn held a bunch of washed-up losers, like a pen full of old sheep, munching on snacks and reliving their glory days. I had finally realized that those braggarts never participated in battles, unless you count fighting over who got stuck with the bill. Shame on me for assuming that The Fat Lute catered to actual adventurers. I almost gave up and went solo, but then Braenoic rescued me.

She pulled me out of the throngs of armchair heroes and into an alcove filled with a table where she mesmerized me with her eyes. I don't know why they affected me so much, but whoa, her gaze hit me like an orc grappler at an arena fight.

Braenoic stood a half a foot taller than me, maybe four feet total, and had surprisingly little facial hair for a dwarf. She wore a curious brooch, which turned out to be her family's symbol, made of a piece of lapis lazuli in the shape of a hammer set in a disk of polished hematite. I thought she had a goofy grin, but it

turned out to be a scar on her left cheek that made it look like she was always happy. Later I would find out about her temper, but at that point I was just glad to huddle with her in the alcove.

"Hey, are you Zook Terpin? I hear you're looking for work. What's your specialty?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's me; I'm an alchemist," I said. "And I know how to knock heads with my stick. What's the plan?"

"Do you have healing potions? Can you make more?" This came from the third person in the alcove. The leather armor and quiver of arrows on his back pegged him as a rogue of some sort. The elfish features and hawk fetish amulet said ranger. "We could use a healer."

I knew this routine--I'd had some nibbles over the past few days, and it always went the same way: we exchanged information, made plans, but then never followed through. This time started the same. I told them all of my skills, they told me theirs, and then we talked about where we wanted to go hunt. The elf was a ranger named Livos, and Braenoic turned out to be a warrior. I didn't really care about the particulars. I just wanted to get out of this place and go on an adventure, and if that meant spending more time with Braenoic, then all the better. The three of us became friends almost immediately, so we actually carried out our plans.

Our first hunt went a little roughly, but over the years we fought together enough to learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, and to perfect our group technique. Our many successes gained us a little fame, so people always wanted to join our team. We took on a few new souls, and from time to time someone would retire, so we stayed at around half a dozen on any given adventure. The group started to dissolve when we lost Livos to the elfish Clan War. He didn't die in the war, but none of the elves were the same after their Mother Tree burned to the ground. Braenoic and I retired around the same time, and no one left wanted to lead, so the group sort of faded away. We used to get together every few years to drink and talk about the good old days, but nowadays I've lost touch with the old crew.

But reminiscing about the good old days wouldn't help Nerni. I had to focus. I had to figure out if she was in any danger. Well, any more danger than we all faced living in a city as big as Erona.

I went downstairs to Nerni's kitchen and brewed myself a mug of tea. I needed to relax and get my thoughts straight so that I could actually be of some help. With Fud recently deceased, rummaging through the cupboards seemed inappropriate. I'd done it a million times before, but death changes our perceptions of the world. I felt the need to be more formal. But I needed tea and time to think, so I carried on.

The tea did the trick. After brewing it, I sat at the table and worked my way through the possibilities. Erona is a melting pot where people of all races, politics, and religions come together to live and do business. Eronians thrive on the diversity and the resulting squabbles that inevitably crop up when you mix everyone together. Sure, there is plenty of crime and destitution, but for the most part, the diversity breeds strength.

The Spiritual Collective is a perfect example: while the city government grew in power, the various religious sects dwindled, and none retained enough of a following to win dominance. Instead of dying out, they banded together to form an organization with enough power to rival the city government: the Spiritual Collective.

They are political enough not to behave aggressively as an organization, except against targets that no one trusted—like necromancers. However, a religious fanatic might have taken it upon himself to execute the will of whatever deity he believed in. If so, anybody could be the next target.

It didn't seem very likely, though. If anyone wanted to hurt the clocksmiths, it was the Labor Guild. Clockwork laborers were expensive to buy, but cheap to run, so many people opted to use them instead of hiring workers from the Labor Guild. Technological advances can be tough to accept for the people who get replaced by the machines. Periodically, vandals would destroy clockworks, and everyone blamed the Labor Guild, which denied it, of course.

Could the Labor Guild have killed Fud in order to set clockwork development back a few years? Fud was that influential, but then again, so was Nerni. If it had been them, they would likely return to finish the job.

Those were the two groups that send out hate mail, so they topped my list of potential bad guys. That assumed that it wasn't just an accident caused by working too late into the night without someone around to help. I would need to check out the clockwork and see if Nerni was right. If she was, then maybe I could convince Tillman to look into the death a bit closer. Otherwise I'd need to dust off my old equipment and do some snooping on my own.

One way or another, I'd make sure Nerni didn't have anything to worry about.

I headed to the foyer to find Antonio, the one who'd been guarding the front door when I arrived. He sat in the foyer sprawled out on a cushioned chair like a shameless cat.

I watched him pull a roasted nut from a canvas sack and pop it into his mouth. He chewed for a few seconds and then spit bits of shell on the wooden floor. A hiss of steam and the whirring of a flywheel spinning up signaled the imminent arrival of a clockwork. Sure enough, a foot-long rat made of gleaming steel plates and brass joints leapt from a hole in the wall and scurried over to the bits of shell. It gobbled up the shells and then rushed back to its hole. Antonio laughed and popped a new nut into his mouth.

"Shouldn't you be searching for clues or beating witnesses or something?" We stood in the front hall, or at least I stood.

He spat out the shell and swallowed. "Nah, Tillman says it was an accident. We get the morticians to check it out, make some notes, and then that's that. I just gotta baby-sit this place while they work. Tillman is pissed at me for letting you in. That's why he stuck me here." He laughed again as the clockwork rat cleaned up the mess.

"At least you get to relax."

"Man, who wants to relax when the magi are out there getting feisty? I've always wanted an excuse to put them uppity finger-waggers in their place."

"Oh? Are they causing trouble again?"

The magi lived over in the Arcane Quarter and they tended to view themselves as privileged and outside the normal rules of society. They wielded massive power, and they enjoyed reminding the rest of us of what we don't have. Normally magi live well apart from regular folk, but during the city's expansion days, Erona engulfed a school for magic that existed next to the river that now runs through town. The school refused to relocate, so instead the city grew up around it, converting the school into the center of a magi neighborhood.

The magi and Erona's authorities fought at first, but even though the magi can and did destroy lives easily, they couldn't stop the throngs of settlers that moved to Erona. When the new districts grew around them, they gave up resisting and formed a truce with the city.

The magi don't like a lot of people, but they especially dislike the residents of the Techno-Industrial Zone, better known as "The Tiz". The technologists--clocksmiths, steam engineers, gunsmiths, and the like--create things that give power to ordinary people, so naturally that makes the magi unhappy. With advances like the train and steam-powered factories showing up in town, tensions have been high, and lately there have been a few minor scuffles.

"Yeah, you could call it trouble. The Watch had to bust one of them for starting a fire at a tavern, and now the rest all got their robes in a bunch. Sayin' they don't live by the City's laws and how we got no authority over them. Now we get to patrol the Arcane Quarter more and knock on some doors. Yeah, I'd like to catch one breaking the law so I could knock him down a few notches."

If the magi were "getting feisty," one of them might have animated the clockwork with magic. That would explain a lot. They only followed Erona's laws because they had no reason not to. An especially disgruntled mage might have taken it upon himself to kill Fud. But they disliked all technology; why would they have killed him in the dark of night when there were so many more visible targets?

"Aren't you at all curious about how a clockwork could kill a man? Those things are all over the city now, and more are getting made every day. Not even a little worried? What if a mage was behind the murder? They might send all the clockworks on a rampage."

"Nah, a mage wouldn't use a machine. They'd just blow things up. Besides, the clockworks are just toys, little toy creatures. What's to be scared of? I've seen worse. Believe me, I've seen much worse in this city. Vampires, lycanthropes, zombies--hey, remember last year when they crawled out of that graveyard in Mossdale Terrace? Man, I never seen rich folk run that fast." He laughed at his own joke, which is always bad form, and doubly so when the joke isn't funny, or not even a real joke. "You know, we even had a team of Lestine infiltrators trying to stir up trouble down by the Docks once. So yeah, a malfunctioning clockwork is pretty run-of-the-mill."

"Well then, do you mind if I poke around in there a bit? I promise not to touch anything."

"It was an accident, what do I care? But then, I'm already in trouble because of you. Maybe I shouldn't let you go in . . ."

"That would be a shame, because I have this love potion I've wanted to give away . . ."

"Oh yeah? What does it do?"

"You know how ugly women look better after you've had a few beers? Well, drink this, and that's how you'll look to women. At least until the effects wear off."

"And you carry this potion around with you?"

"Yeah, well, you want it or not?"

"Alright, sure. Knock yourself out. Hey, those bottles you brought in, would they have really exploded if I hadn't let you in?"

"Not really. I was just jerking you around. I wanted to get out of the crowd out front, though. Damn protesters always make it tough to do business. They've pushed over my cart before."

"That so? Well, I'll tell Tillman that I let you in for your own protection then. He told me I had a chewing out coming for letting you in. Now if you will excuse me, I'm going to take a nap. Remember, don't touch anything."

I left Antonio to his tough job and headed back to the workshop. The Watchmen didn't look like they would push for a better explanation, so if Nerni didn't think it was an accident, then I'd have to poke around on my own. I wasn't a murder investigator--if indeed it was murder--but I'd solved enough riddles in those old tombs we used to explore that I felt confident I would be better than nothing, which is to say the likes of Antonio.

Two sliding doors made of oxidized copper marked the entrance to Fudnottin's workshop, which occupied most of the first floor of the building. Beyond the doors, the room opened up into an area big enough to hold a respectable party. The ceiling arched over a series of second-floor catwalks. Storage racks on the far side of the room reached all the way to the roof. Wooden crates, metal boxes, spools of tubing, assorted metal bits, and disassembled clockwork components weighed down the shelves, which bowed under the weight in places. An iron-shod door at the back of the storage area led to an alley.

The rest of the room was roughly partitioned into two areas: one for designing clockworks, and one for assembling them. The design area, which claimed the space next to the near wall, had two desks covered with papers and schematic drawings, several filled bookshelves, and a well-used blackboard. The assembly space covered most of the middle of the room. Several oil-stained workbenches that Fud and Nerni moved around as needed for each project lived there. Tools lay scattered all around, along with many unidentifiable parts.

It was in the central area that Fudnottin lay at the foot of the clockwork prototype. I tried to avoid walking in the blood and gore as best I could, but I had to examine his body.

The clockwork--a humanoid skeleton made of metal and tubing--stood there over the sheet-covered corpse. My skin crawled at the sight of the unnatural monstrosity. Maybe I was being unfair, but seeing those mechanical things when they moved scared me somewhere deep down inside. It wasn't rational, but there it was. Seeing that one standing there, still as a statue, set my nerves on edge. I took a deep breath and forced myself to walk over to the scene of the murder.

When I lifted the sheet that covered Fudnottin, I could smell the decay already setting in. Hopefully the mortician would arrive soon. I hated to think of good old Fud as just another corpse, but in a town of this size and density, you had to be careful how you treated the dead. Yeah, sure, there was always the risk of them rising again due to all the spells and negative energy floating around, but the bigger risk was a run-of-the-mill plague or some other exotic disease that flourished in the decaying remains of one's neighbors.

Thinking of him as a corpse instead of Fudnottin helped. Actually, it was pretty easy to do. I'd seen many dead bodies, people and things killed by swords, spells, dragon breath, you name it, but what lay before me looked particularly gruesome.

I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath through my disproportionately large nose. Gnomes are known for their cavernous nostrils and olfactory senses that rival those of wolves. I tried to catalog the smells of the room, but a clocksmith workshop has too many overpowering odors to easily distinguish one from another. I did smell the beginnings of decay. Once Fud's brain stopped working, nature took over and started the reclamation process. Nature is not very sentimental. And I couldn't be either. I had to examine the body directly.

The skeleton was mostly intact, but the flesh and viscera looked like they had been torn apart by some sort of beast. I couldn't look at the corpse for long and had to replace the sheet. Staggering a bit as I walked, I unbolted the back door and

went outside into the alley. No one deserved to die like that, but when it happened to a friend . . .

My stomach clenched up and I could hear the blood flowing through my body. A sickening feeling overwhelmed me, making me shudder and close my eyes. I took a deep breath, but that just magnified the feeling. The rotten egg odor of sulfur permeated the alley and when I took that breath, it pushed me over the edge.

Once I felt better, I cleaned myself up and went back inside. Thankfully, no one had been there to see me fertilize the ground with my breakfast.

Over the decay, I could still smell the metal, chemicals, and burning. The mixture differed from the last time I'd been here, but who knew what experiments Fud had run in the meantime? New smells wafted out of Fudnottin's workshop all the time.

I avoided looking at the crimson-spotted sheet and approached the prototype clockwork--Fudnottin's pride and joy. He'd been making clockworks since long before we met, and he was one of the best. Nerni had been his assistant, and the two of them had created innovation after innovation. That's probably why they got the most hate mail from the various anti-technology groups out there. I only got a little since potions didn't take jobs away from the Labor Guild and alchemy was one of those transitional arts that combined technology and science with the more arcane arts of magic. The Spiritual Collective and associated fanatics didn't like magic of any sort, except divine of course--the gods could do as they pleased, and who were we to try to usurp their divine providence by working miracles of our own? I got hate mail from every random societal welt that knew I consorted with the technologists. I wasn't famous, but I supplied famous clocksmiths, and protesters hung around their workshops most days keeping tabs on who came and went.

The prototype was a statue, no gears turning. Silently it waited, without even a hum from the timing mechanism. It was humanoid in shape, since Fudnottin was of the school of thought that believed people wouldn't be so against clockworks if they looked recognizable. He had started that movement with his clockwork rats. I was of the school of thought that believed clockworks shouldn't be let out of mines and basements and other places no self-respecting person would want to go. Well, maybe dwarves.

This prototype, built to resemble a short human, was maybe four and a half feet of gears, metal chassis, and hydraulics. Fudnottin always left the covering until last, so this creation lacked a skin, which made it all the more ominous. Each upper arm consisted of a light metal frame surrounding a large hydraulic cylinder, which served as both bicep and tricep. Snaking in and out around the frame, hoses for the hydraulic fluid laced the machine like blood vessels. A series of pumps and a large reservoir completed the analogy by acting as the heart in the machine's torso. The forearms and legs resembled the upper arms, and elaborate hinged joints connected all the parts. The hands and fingers held much smaller hydraulic cylinders, but I'd seen them in action, and they could bend nails like limp noodles. Yes, if the prototype had malfunctioned, it was certainly capable of ripping a man apart.

A layer of blood coated the hands and forearms. I choked back my discomfort at being so close to the thing and looked even closer. The little bits of

gore stuck inside the metal frame suggested that Investigator Tillman was right in his assessment--this prototype clockwork did seem to have killed my friend. So the real questions were why did it do it, and how was it possible, if indeed there was no hydraulic fluid to make the cylinders expand and contract?

#

I walked behind the prototype and moved a stepstool out of the way so I could take a closer look. The hydraulic fluid reservoir's cap lay on a nearby workbench, which is where Fud would have put it when cleaning out the fluid. I clenched my teeth and tapped the side of the metal tank with my finger. The good news was that it made a hollow echoing sound, meaning that the clockwork's reservoir was as empty as its soul, if you believed in that sort of thing. The better news was that it didn't turn around and attack me.

I found a clean rag and tore off a piece, which I stuck on the end of a thin metal rod, and then I swabbed the bottom of the reservoir. The rag came up clean and dry.

Hmmm, it supported Nerni's story, but how could that be? Not only had they drained the fluid from the clockwork, but they had flushed and cleaned it as well. I guess Fudnottin didn't get to be the best by leaving residue around to contaminate between batches of test fluid. The floor revealed no traces of fluid, just blood. Hydraulic fluid is blue, so it would be hard to miss. Besides, even blood couldn't hide its pungent odor. With no spilled fluid, the clockwork couldn't have accidentally sprung a leak and drained after the fact.

I put the swab on the workbench by the reservoir cap and turned back to the machine. I cringed at the thought of touching the thing, but I had to make sure. Pulling on the arm rewarded me with some movement, but those cylinders had pretty tight tolerances, so they didn't move easily. Still, I could feel that I wasn't pulling against the force of the fluid. Once the arm was in the new position, it stayed there, which seemed odd at first. I never really thought about it, but I guess Fudnottin wouldn't have been able to work on the thing if it flopped down like a de-animated skeleton every time he drained it.

Since the prototype wasn't going anywhere—or at least it shouldn't--I left the workshop to go check on Nerni; she would need a friend. I gave the room one last glance as I left, but the clockwork hadn't moved. It was silent and still as a corpse, which wasn't the kind of comparison I should be making given the state of my friend on the floor. But I had. Sigh. I guess you can't stop your brain.

The building's architect had opted for a compromise size on the main floor--a tad cramped for a human, and a wee big for a gnome. Dwarves had probably built it back in the great expansion days. They constructed most of the buildings in the Tiz, and they weren't known to address the comfort needs of other races in their architecture. My footsteps gave a tinny echo against the metal walls. Maybe it was the mood, but the place seemed colder than usual.

Or maybe Fudnottin's death affected me more than it should have. Like I said, I'd seen friends die before. Some of them had died in my arms or at my feet as we fought our way across the Long Desert, the jungles of Irithon, and through the

ruins of the Doltho civilization. But that was a long time ago. No one close to me had died in years, and I guess you can't stay numb to that sort of thing forever.

Upstairs, the furnishings were more gnome-sized. Customers didn't come up here, so Nerni and Fud didn't need to cater to big people. I knew where the bedroom was; I knew all too well. Being up here brought back memories, but I couldn't afford to think about our past right now. Nerni needed me to be strong, and she'd gotten over me quite a long time ago. There was no way to avoid it, but I had to drag myself forward all the same. What was it about traumatic times that brought up all the old emotions?

The artwork on the hallway's walls caught my attention. They must have changed it since the last time I was here. I'd have to ask Nerni about that. Halfway there. My heart pounded and my stomach tightened again. I was acting stupid, childish. What was I? A kid again? I hadn't felt like this since the last time I saw Braenoic. The rational part of my brain told me that I was being foolish. I wasn't in love with Nerni. Even back then it hadn't been love. Over the years, we'd all grown closer. So maybe I did love her now, but as a friend, a sister. Then the other part of my brain chimed in. I'd been single a long time. We had a history. She was now single too.

STOP! I clenched my fists and stopped walking. Deep breaths. Once I got my brain in line, I entered the bedroom.

Nerni was through crying and had entered the silence phase. I talked to her, sat next to her on the bed, put my arm around her shoulder, and gave her a hug. My feelings stirred up briefly, but my rational brain kept them at bay. After ten minutes of silence, she spoke.

"He was kind of an ass, you know."

I almost choked. If I had been drinking something, it would have sprayed all over the room.

"No, really, I'm sad he died, but it seems like I should be more sad."

Now my rational brain sided with my emotions and made it a struggle to sit there with her. I felt horrible, like I'd betrayed Fud's memory. I told myself that Nerni was just going through a bizarre form of the denial phase of grieving, but somewhere deep inside my emotions told me otherwise. But then again, that's why you shouldn't always listen to your emotions.

"You're just going through the grieving process. It's natural. Thinking about all the bad things he did, his problems and such, that's your brain's way of ignoring the pain and sorrow. Next you'll hate yourself for thinking the bad thoughts and you'll only remember the positive things. He'll be an angel above reproach, but that isn't good either. You have to remember the good and bad, and accept what happened."

Her hands shuddered and her tears flowed again, but she didn't make any sounds.

"Why? Why do I have to accept it?" She pulled away from me and covered her face with one hand. Then she did sob. With her other hand, she punched my chest halfheartedly, which was still enough to notice. You get a pretty strong upper

body working on clockworks all day. She wore a sleeveless work shirt, so I could see the muscular definition of her arms, like a carved statue. Damn it! Shut up!

"Does your mother still live over in Upper Wildcreek?" She said yes between sobs. "Okay, I'll send Lumo over to bring her here. You shouldn't be alone right now."

"Wait. Tell me what you think happened. What's going to happen now? Was it an accident?"

"The Watchmen seem to think so, but as you said, it couldn't have happened since the prototype had no hydraulic fluid. I checked and it was flushed and cleaned, so it couldn't have just leaked out after the fact. Besides, there wasn't any on the floor. I'll go speak to Investigator Tillman and see if I can convince him that it was more than a malfunction."

"Thank you, Zook. I knew I could count on you." She hugged me tight and I slammed the lid on my emotions before they could respond. "I'm so lucky to have a friend like you."

"Nerni," I pulled back and looked her in the eyes, those yellowish green . . . STOP! "Did Fudnottin get any recent hate mail or threats that seemed out of the ordinary?" For most folks, any hate mail would be out of the ordinary. That she had to think about which ones were especially strange said something about her chosen profession. Whether it said something good or bad, I'm not sure, but it definitely said something. "Maybe one with a specific threat to kill him or use his technology against him?"

"I don't think so, but I stopped reading those long ago. I gave a stack to Investigator Tillman, so you'll have to ask him."

"Do you think one of the other clocksmiths would have done it? They might have wanted to steal the prototype?"

Her eyes widened and she drew back.

"Of course not. How could you think that? Never mind that we all help each other, but everyone would know right away if someone tried to sell our prototype as their own."

"Still, another clocksmith would have been able to put the fluid in and clean it out after."

"No way, we're all friendly."

I just nodded at her. She seemed sure enough that I didn't want to push it unless I found some evidence.

"Will you be okay alone until your mother gets here?"

"I think so . . . everything has happened so fast. I need some time to gather myself together before Mum comes over. I try to think about Fud being gone, but I can't wrap my brain around the idea for more than a moment, and then . . ." She cried again and laughed between the sobs. "See?"

I gave her a "just friends" hug and told her I'd be back when I knew more. Back down in the workshop, the wheels in my brain turned a few times while I unloaded my cart so I could bring it back home. I hated that my friend had been killed, but I did love a mystery. It had been a long time since I'd used my non-

alchemy skills, so I looked forward to the chance to try and figure out who was behind Fudnottin's death.

Pushing through the crowd that had gathered outside, I overheard talk about Fudnottin's death. It was hard to keep a secret, even in a city as big as Erona. They all seemed glad that his clockwork production had stopped, but at least some didn't think that dying was a good way for it to have stopped. One woman, however, expressed the opinion that the only good gnomish clockwork inventor was a dead gnomish clockwork inventor. My cart accidentally ran over her foot.

I had to get back to my shop and reorganize. There were a few jobs I needed to finish, but with Lumo's help, I could clear my schedule so that I could help Nerni.

I took a deep breath and felt the crisp air all the way down. Winter would be here soon, and that meant nights in the tavern drinking ale and passing the time in front of a roaring fire with friends. But this year, Fud wouldn't be there, and Nerni wouldn't be the same person. For her sake, I needed to clear everything up as fast as possible.

#

Erona was the kind of city where one gnome's death is a side note at best in most people's daily news. Too many people. Too much going on. It's hard to care about the problems of people outside of your circle.

When I call Erona a city, I really mean sprawling conglomerate of urban ecosystems. It hasn't been just a city in many, many years. The western edge of the land forms the shore of the Desnay Ocean. The midpoint of the coastal side of town contains Yeigen Bay, a protected body of water that makes a perfect port. During the expansion days of every old empire that graced the land with its presence, many small towns and outposts sprang up around the bay and formed the nucleus of what would eventually grow into Erona. The bay is fed on the eastern edge by the Serpentine River, which flows from the mountains in the east into the bay.

As the region drew more and more settlers and immigrants, the towns grew together and merged. Eventually the residents couldn't maintain their separate identities anymore, so they reorganized the local governments into the city of Erona. People continued to migrate to the city, and Erona expanded eastward along the sides of the river.

My shop was located on Alchemist Row in the Downsfield district, which served as a sort of dividing line between the Arcane Quarter and the Techno-Industrial Zone--the Tiz. The two schools of thought--magic and technology--didn't much get along. The magi joined Erona earlier on, so the Arcane Quarter lies west of Downsfield, closer to the ocean.

The technologists, mostly gnomes and dwarves, arrived later, so the Tiz lies further away from the ocean. Their goal is better living through machinery. Down in the Tiz, steam engines hiss and clunk, and clockwork creatures of all sorts prowl the streets.

With the tension between the magi and the technologists, life was always fun for folks like me whose arts incorporated a little magic and technology. Still, as long as you stayed out of the spotlight, you mostly got left alone. Downsfield sat on the north side of the river, about halfway between the ocean and the eastern edge of

Erona. The Techno-Industrial Zone was to the east, and if I took the boardwalk along the water, it would be a pleasant trip.

If I wanted adventure, I could always brave the train that the technologists constructed out in the newer parts of town. Right now, the steam-powered monstrosity started between Downsfield and the Tiz and ran away from the ocean. Until they extended it west, the thing didn't do me much good. That wouldn't happen for a long time on account of the magi who detest anything technological. The way the train clattered and shook, I tended to agree.

Fud's workshop was located in the west end of the Tiz, on the third tier. Back before people arrived, the Tiz was a hill that gently sloped down to the river. Ancient civilizations built on it, died out, and crumbled into ruin. Eventually the technologists showed up and used the rubble to flatten the area into a massive four-tiered pyramid that was wider than it was tall.

The lowest tier housed the docks on the south side and warehouses on the other sides. A wall around the non-river sides kept the sights, sounds, and odors out of the neighboring districts, like Downfield.

Crafts-men, -women, and -other lived and worked in house-sized workshops that covered the second tier. Tiz denizens had built larger factories on the third tier so they would be close to the windmill farm that grew on the top tier. The windmills sat on the highest spot in town for miles, and if you had an unobstructed view and a clear day, you could see the Tiz windmills all the way from the magi school in the Arcane Quarter.

Fudnottin's place was typical of the Tiz: a warehouse with a brick foundation and metal walls welded together at the top to form the roof. Patches of rust covered every bit of metal. The building had worn a fresh coat of green paint once, long ago, but judging from the look, workers from an ancient civilization must have done the job. Fudnottin wasn't big on appearances, which is maybe why Nerni managed to fall for me ten years ago when we first met.

As I walked through the Tiz, I grimaced at all the clockworks ambling around. The most noticeable were human-sized but looked like mechanical spiders with only four legs. They crawled the streets, one ponderous step at a time, transporting heavy crates full of metal components from one shop to another.

If you looked closely, you could see all the smaller clockworks scurrying around the streets and back alleys. They ranged from mechanical cats that hunted live vermin to artificial lizards that crawled over the buildings performing little bits of maintenance here and there. It was unnatural and always set my nerves on edge, so I did my best to avoid noticing them.

The clockworks fit in with the local architecture: these buildings had more metal and less wood than elsewhere in town. And instead of rough stones, the builders opted for red bricks. Now with the advent of steam power, pipes snaked around between the buildings. They clattered and shook when steam hissed through.

A different sort of people lived here as well. There were more gnomes and dwarves, and fewer of the other races, except for the ubiquitous humans. Fortunately for me, the elves avoided this place--those annoying snots shied away from technology--but given time, I was sure they'd infest here too.

The odors were more acrid, probably from the smelting or whatever else they did around here, and the air always smelled of burning and chemicals, with a sharp hint of raw metal. The price of progress, I suppose.

The Tiz lay next to River Walk--the main east-west thoroughfare through town. There, wide boardwalks paralleled the river all the way from the ocean to the far eastern end of town interrupted here and there by loading docks that serviced the various districts. The open area created by the boardwalk and river stretched all the way to the bay, and the constant on-shore breeze carried the ocean smells all the way to the far side of the city.

I savored the odor of salt water and seaweed as I pushed my cart down the crowded street. Growing up far inland made me appreciate the salty odor more than the spoiled city folk who took it for granted. A hint of dead fish spiced things up, but it didn't overpower my sensitive nose today, for which I was glad.

The denizens of River Walk were not as organized as the folks in the other parts of town. Junk vendors, street casinos, and other assorted annoyances filled the place and covered over its inherent beauty. Since the area doesn't belong to any particular neighborhood, no one can claim it and enforce their unwritten rules. In Downsfield, for example, we don't let smiths or woodworkers hawk their wares. The unwritten rule being that Downsfield's Alchemy Row is the place to go for potions; we don't want to dilute that. River Walk has evolved into the place to go for anything you can't find elsewhere in the city. I'm sure there are some amazing treasures to be found, but you'd never know it because most of the vendors sell scavenged junk, rusty weapons, and the like. They sure do like to shout about the great deals they offer, though. An entrepreneur could make a living in that vast, unregulated bazaar, however, and many do by buying items cheaply at one end and selling them for a profit at the other. One man's junk . . .

The other popular option for making money is gambling. Every block hosts a disreputable sort yelling at passersby to try their luck with the dice, cards, coin toss, or pretty much anything that involves chance. Unsanctioned gambling establishments--street casinos--are officially illegal, but the authorities ignore their presence. Every so often they get enough complaints about a particular vendor that they'll have to make an arrest, but then it's back to business as usual for the remaining low-lives.

For a long time, the wall of sound from all the vendors shouting in River Walk annoyed me and put me in a pissy mood. Now, though, I just tune it out as the background noise of the city. I guess that makes me city-folk.

When I turned off of the boardwalk onto the street that led through the center of Downsfield, I took a deep breath and savored the complex odors that can only come from alchemy. The smells give me that comfort feeling, like when you go home to visit your parents. If it weren't for the smells, Downsfield would be a barren place.

Downsfield probably earned its name for being the flat area between the hill that became the Tiz and the hill at the center of the Arcane Quarter. Regular people settled there initially, but when the technologists moved into the Tiz, alchemists took over. Magi and technologists are our two primary groups of customers, so situating

ourselves between them made perfect sense. Earlier alchemists converted all the homes into shops and laid down stone over everything between the shops so they could efficiently transport their goods.

Few trees grew in my district: just a couple that had broken through the cobblestones and now lined the street. They had lost their leaves a month ago and now looked like great skeletal beings reaching forth to worship the overcast sky. Come to think of it, I knew some druids up north who lived on a diet of fruits and nuts and looked like the Downsfield trees when they performed their ritual dances.

The buildings in my part of town began life as sturdy rock constructions, but time, weather, and unconcerned owners had left them ragged around the edges. It was a pretty bland neighborhood, but I enjoyed the quiet. I'd had my share of adventure.

I passed through the marketplace at the center of the district and waved at the alchemists, herbalists, and other assorted craftsmen and women out by their display carts. These were the apprentices who didn't have their own shops, or else trade-killers from other districts and towns who leached off of Downsfield's reputation to attract customers. I made sure to check out any new competition when they arrived, so I knew most of the people there. Some had traveled from far-off villages, so they'd stick around for a few days then go home to restock before returning. Today no one participated in the usual background conversations and arguments. I guess the overcast sky and chilled air made folks bundle up and hunker down. I said hello to my drinking buddies but didn't stay for chitchat.

On the way back to the shop, my stomach growled to remind me that it was lunchtime. I guess it had been patient with me while I was at Fud's place--even after being unceremoniously emptied--but now it demanded attention. There were plenty of food carts in the marketplace in Downsfield, so I fed it and picked up something for Lumo. With the air getting chillier, I didn't want to carry his lunch too far or it would get cold. Although, come to think of it, he didn't seem to mind congealed grease.

While Lumo ate, I told him what had happened that morning. Between sloppy mouthfuls of day-old roast chicken, he mumbled his condolences--Lumo liked Fud. The gnome had always treated him as a respectable alchemist and not as a primitive humanoid.

When he finished eating, we took the stairs into the basement so we could finish off a batch of metallic gold dye. I generally leave the normal colors to the dye makers, who all live in an overly pungent part of town next door to the tanners. Producing high-quality metallic dyes, on the other hand, requires the skills of an alchemist, so I'm happy to poach the business. In fact, with the generally high level of wealth these days, people are willing to spend a lot to look good, and the dyes are a major part of my business. We had to finish this order and deliver it today or else my delicately balanced system of inventory purchasing and sales would come crashing down like an ogre aviator. Fortunately the customer lived in the Tiz, so I'd be able to do ask around about Fud's death while I was there.

Since time was of the essence, I started the first batch so that Lumo could see how it was done. When it was done, I would go take care of other business while

he finished the rest. But as I worked, my mind wandered back to Fudnottin's workshop. What happened last night?

I wrinkled my nose when a noxious cloud emanated from the beaker heating on the lab burner, and with a nose the size of mine, that took a lot of effort. The golden liquid bubbling inside shimmered for a moment, so I motioned for Lumo to add the emulsifier. He poured the right amount, but once again the fool forgot to stir, and he let the opaque solution accumulate at the bottom. I didn't want the beaker to blow up, so I gestured at him in the universal alchemist sign language to begin mixing.

"What?"

Sigh.

"Mix, fool! If it sits on the heat too long, it'll become unstable!"

I had to salvage the dye so that I could get back to helping Nerni, so I grabbed the glass rod and stirred it myself. I monitored the bottom of the beaker, looking for any sign that the dye had been ruined.

The lack of an explosion encouraged me to continue.

"Master Terpin," said Lumo, "it's smoking."

Whoops, I'd let it get too hot. That's me, Zook Terpin, Master Alchemist, getting too focused and not seeing the big picture with a volatile sample on the burner. I shoved my hands in the hot mitts, yanked the beaker from the flame, and placed it on the workbench. I couldn't see too well through the smoked glass of my safety goggles, so I ditched the mitts and pushed the goggles up to the bald spot on top of my head. I stuck my face right up next to the glass and peered around my schnoz to watch the viscosity of the fluid while I gently stirred. Too much heat meant that it wouldn't be viscous enough to stick to whatever material the dye would be applied to, but as it cooled, I knew I had been lucky--this batch wasn't ruined. Well, at least it wasn't too runny. I proclaimed this batch done.

"Good catch, Lumo. We'll make a master alchemist out of you yet." I put away the goggles, and then I gave him my I'm-being-nice smile so he would know I wasn't just giving him a hard time. Lumo was a hard worker but a little slow. I suppose all goblins are slow, which meant that Lumo was actually quite bright--for a goblin--but I'd had better apprentices. Still, he was smart enough to know his limitations, and he compensated by being methodical about everything, which is more than I can say for myself. When we both paid attention, we made a good team. He was so good-natured about everything that I felt bad for having killed so many goblins back in my adventuring days. He'd already heard my story before he showed up on my doorstep, but I hadn't killed anyone in his clan, so he didn't care that much about my past. He did tend to flinch a lot around me the first year, though.

"Thanks, Boss!" A toothy grin burst across his face and he shuffled his feet in his private victory dance. Good. Lumo needed to build up his confidence. Maybe I'd have him whip up a few bottles of Wisp Extract for Magus Seebert before he left to fetch Melda. That would also give me time to do some poking around and see Nerni again before her mother arrived.

"All right, now make five more just like it, and when they finish cooling down, bottle them up and put them with the others. I want to deliver the lot on my

way back over to the Tiz. And remember not to use the vented caps. I don't want to get fluid all over me again."

"Yes, sir. I'll be careful."

I left Lumo to finish prepping the samples and walked upstairs to my office. Just out of curiosity, I picked up my recent mail, which Lumo had stacked in the wooden box next to my desk. I hated dealing with the letters, since they were usually bills, invoices, and assorted junk, but I forced myself to, on the off chance that I'd gotten a message that was connected to Fudnottin's death. There was nothing out of the ordinary, though one letter suggested some novel uses of my Stone-Skin potion (a Terpin's Potions exclusive). They were the kinds of ideas that wouldn't be popular with all but a few religious sects, and especially unpopular with the Spiritual Collective, so I filed that one away in the "Possible Marketing Ideas" folder. The rest I tossed in the trash. So much for getting lucky.

Time to dress like a respectable businessman. My friends--long-time city dwellers whose worst fights occurred over fig prices at the market--often chide my paranoia, since I never travel the streets without a relic from my prior life: my fighting cane. I enjoy hiking around town, and I never expect trouble, but fifty years living by the sword gave me habits that border on affectations. Leaving the house without my relics felt like dancing sober--unsettling. Fortunately, canes were in fashion, so I didn't look too out of place.

Today, however, I decided to add a second relic: my potion belt. I agonized over the unfashionable canvas belt with padded pouches and multicolored stains since there was really no way to make it look good. The belt elicited disdain from the locals, who wouldn't be caught dead wearing even last year's styles, but it was an essential accessory back in the old days, when quick access to the correct bottle meant the difference between life and death. After learning about Fud's mysterious death this morning, I decided that I would have to sacrifice fashion for function and wear the moldy old thing. At least until I was sure that Nerni was safe.

I packed a few healing potions for emergencies, some bottles of Sleep-Be-Gone in case I had to spend a late night, and a few vials of my more sinister concoctions for those situations requiring more than words. I hadn't used them since settling down, so who knew if they retained their potency?

Gods, that belt saved our butts as often as any sword, but it looked ugly, and my friends all gave me a hard time for wearing it. One year for my birthday Braenoic spent a month's loot commissioning a leather version to replace it. Funny how she and I were the only ones from our group of companions who ever gave each other gifts. The belt was very nice--like all our gifts--but I could never break it in properly, and it still creaks when I take it down from its hook in my closet. I do wear it, but only on occasions when grubby won't do. Today was not the day to get used to a new belt.

Lumo shouted up from the workshop that he was almost done, so I finished getting ready. Other than the belt, I dressed with a keen sense of fashion. You never know when you'll meet a lady, so it's best to always be prepared. I looked through my wardrobe for just the right outfit that said, "I'm looking for action and I'm financially secure" while at the same time saying, "I'm a professional who knows his

stuff so you should be happy to pay me for my services" and "I know my way around the streets, so if you mess with me, you'll get your ass handed to you." It was a tricky combination to pull off, but I had the skill and the wardrobe to back me up.

Black leather boots were a given. The weather was chilly today, so I added a pair of loose, charcoal gray linen pantaloons that puffed out ever so slightly where they tucked into the boots. For my upper body, I went for a tight yellow long-sleeved silk undershirt and a forest green short-sleeved tunic. They complemented the distinguished look that started with the ring of white hair flowing toward the back of my head and ended with the round spectacles with plum-colored lenses that garnered hungry looks from all the ladies. What can I say? I know style.

My potion belt secured the tunic in place. A brown cloak so dark as to be almost black--you know, the color of a proper stout--kept out the chill, and my trusty cane completed the ensemble.

I rubbed the metal knob that marked the end of the cane's crook. My cane looked like any hardwood walking stick with a curved crook and metal caps on both ends, but in fact, I'd commissioned a smith who knew all sorts of metallurgical spells to make it out of a metal rod we'd found deep in some ancient tomb back in the day. The rod shone like hematite, but the smith had never seen metal like it, and it took him weeks to learn enough to be able to bend one end around to form the crook. After that he gave up and told me no one would be able to turn it into the sword cane I'd always wanted. Instead, I'd had a druid grow some ebon hardwood around it to make it look innocuous enough to carry around town. The stick has blocked many a sword and I've had to pay to regrow the wood, but it's worth it to look sharp. All in all, it made a decent cane and an excellent head knocker.

Lumo had the cart loaded and was in the process of attaching the harness to Shira, my pony who had been relegated to cart pulling duty since we settled in the city. I thought about bringing Lumo along, but we had other orders to fill, and I needed him in the workshop.

"Get to work on the Wisp Extract order for Magus Seebert while I'm inquiring about Fud. We promised it to him by tomorrow, and you know how magi are when they get cranky! Don't take too long, and when you're done go over to Upper Wildcreek and fetch Nerni's mother, Melda. I left her address on my desk. Bring her over to Fud's place and then stick around in case they need help with anything."

"Yes, sir." Lumo didn't look happy, but he wouldn't come out and say anything to displease me.

"What is it now?"

"I can't stand making Wisp Extract. Those things hate me. They always make it such a chore."

I put my face in my hands and took a deep breath.

"They don't hate you. They don't have feelings. We went over this before." I waved my finger at him. "I know you know it. They're like bugs: all instinct and no thought, so they can't have feelings. Just go collect them from the cellar and start processing them. Do as many as you can in an hour and then get Melda. I'll be back

later, so I can see how you did. If you ever want to be an alchemist, you'll have to be able to deal with all these sorts of things on your own."

"Okay, I'll try harder." He slouched lower than normal as he walked up the steps inside. He slouched so much his hands scraped the ground as he walked.

#

It felt strange to be returning to the Tiz, knowing that I couldn't just stop by and lure Fud over to the pub. What was Nerni doing? How was she holding up? The idea of stopping by tempted me, but I needed to make the delivery, and she probably needed more time to recover from the shock. I continued past the street and drove to the soon-to-be owner of my metallic dye.

I delivered the dye to a technologist who wanted the leather components in her contraptions to match the metal pails. It isn't wise to carry a pile of cash, so we made arrangements for my payment to be sent to the bank. The immediate business done, I turned my thoughts to Fud. I wasn't far from The Lamb and Sprocket, Fud's local pub, so I headed that way to poke my nose in and sniff out some information -- and to have a beer. It was too late for the lunch crowd and a bit early for the afternoon alcoholics, but someone might be there.

Once again, I thought about visiting Nerni. Her mother didn't much like me, what with the history and all, so I wanted to be gone when she arrived on the scene. But I needed some new information before talking to Nerni would do any good. Unless she needed more comforting...no, no. Be good. Go to the pub.

As I made my way down the street, thoughts about the murder filled my head until it threatened to explode like some dwarven bomb. I let Shira choose her own path while I pondered what had happened. Something wasn't quite right. Well, there were many things about the situation that weren't quite right, but the evidence didn't fit into any pattern I could dream up. A nagging feeling poked at my mind, but it wouldn't make that final leap from the subconscious to the conscious.

The Lamb and Sprocket. I'd spent a fair bit of time there with Fudnottin and his neighborhood gang. They weren't around, but the innkeeper was still there, cleaning up from the lunch crowd. From the smell of things, lunch had been a fish stew, and the seasonal beer was cream stout--smoky, with a hint of oatmeal, just the way I like it.

The innkeeper was big and hairy, and if I didn't know better, I would have thought he was part ogre, but Maximilien Perrault was all human, and woe to the fool who suggested otherwise. A long mane of black hair covered his head and merged into his scraggly beard, and then presumably extended down his chest and back. His thick forearms were covered in the wiry black stuff as well, but I never had the desire to extrapolate or ask. I was happier not knowing.

I'd like to say that behind the gruff, barbarian-like exterior beat the heart of a big cuddly teddy bear, but that would have been a lie. Max wasn't the sharing and caring type, unless you were sharing your money with him and he was caring deeply about said money. You had to watch your purse around him even once you got on his good side, and I didn't think I'd made the short list.

"Hey, it is good old Zook! Sit yourself here at the bar." He'd already poured me a beer--a friendly gesture, or a way to make sure he got some money out of me for having crossed his doorstep?

"Maximilien Perrault," no one I knew got to call him Max to his face, "I think you read my mind." Ahhh, the beer was smooth and tasty. Chilled slightly, but not too cold, just the perfect temperature. "Did you hear about poor old Fudnottin?"

"Ah, yes. Poor old Fudnottin. It is a sad thing to lose a customer, especially to violence."

"So you think it wasn't an accident? Have you heard something?"

"Oh, I would not know of those things. But if you do not die in bed," wink wink, "it is violent, yes?"

I paid for my beer, plus a little extra, and the small pile of coins didn't last long on the bar. He must have known some magic, because it seemed unlikely that someone so bulky could move so fast.

"Yes, poor old Fudnottin. I will miss hearing him talk about his work. He always drew such a thirsty crowd." Max gave the spotless bar a quick wipe with his towel and then threw it over his left shoulder.

"Did he happen to talk about anything particularly interesting recently? Or have you noticed anyone new or suspicious in that thirsty crowd?"

I paused to take a long swig from my glass. Max had spread his hands wide on the bar and leaned down close to hear me, but now he stood up straight, and then leaned back on the shelf behind the bar.

"Oh, you know me, always hard at work, making sure that the customers are happy and that they have everything they need. Speaking of that, can I persuade you to accept some peanuts?" He grinned.

The Drill. Many times back in the day, I had been through it while digging up information about ancient tombs to explore and plunder.

"A bowl of nuts does sound like it would go well with this beer. I don't suppose you have any fancy nuts?" I conspicuously placed a silver coin on the bar. Max watched me, but didn't move. I placed another one next to its twin.

"I might have some fancy nuts in the back--I'd have to go all the way to check, though." He still didn't move.

"I'd really like some." The twins became triplets, and a smile broke out on Max's face. Grinning like a proud papa, Max adopted the triplets and produced a bowl of plain peanuts from under the bar. Sigh. Money just doesn't go as far these days. At least he seemed willing to open up and share with me now.

"Something funny did happen last week, now that you mention it. Good old Fudnottin entered and was filled with jubilation about his latest--what is the word--experiment?"

"Prototype?"

"Yes! Yes, the prototype. He would not tell anyone why it was so special, and they did pester him for such information, however he was willing to share that it would revolutionize those clockwork things. He said that one could make them do more complex tasks and that they would become almost human. Or gnome-like, I suppose as well."

"That is curious." And out of character for Fudnottin. He must have been very excited about a breakthrough, and very drunk. "Was he drinking a lot that night?"

"Oh my, yes. Celebrating he was. He bought everyone a round of drinks when he arrived, but soon he was talking and they all bought drinks for him."

"How did they react to his jubilation?"

"Well, you know that crowd. Except for the monk, they are all inventors too. They were very curious to find out details, and to help him celebrate too, of course."

"Of course." And if they happened to find out how his prototype worked so they could make their own versions of it, all the better. "Thanks for the information, unless there is anything else?"

"Ah, let's see. Other than that, there have been no things of great interest recently. Well, except for poor old Fudnottin." He looked genuinely sad when he said it. "The regulars were here for lunch and were quite dejected about the events of last night."

"All of them?"

He gave me a dirty look that told me I'd stepped over the line. Max was the kind of innkeeper who was very protective of his customers, and with people like him, you can easily tell where you stand. I'd just gone from being a concerned friend of the dearly departed to an interfering outsider. He swiped the half-full glass of beer out of my hand and made it disappear behind the counter. The bowl of nuts went too. He favored me with a scowl that was both menacing and neutral at the same time. People who can do that are creepy and usually know it.

"I think it is time for you to be exiting now."

I wasn't about to argue. Clearly I hadn't been to the pub enough to be included as a regular. Maybe the monk could help me. He might know who would have been jealous of Fud's invention. If only I could remember his name.

I needed to talk to Nerni about the prototype. Could Fudnottin's colleagues have killed him in order to steal his secrets? Worse things had happened for sure, but it seemed unlikely from what I knew of that crowd. Still, if the culprit wasn't part of a hate group, his friends were the next likely suspects. I needed to find out what was so special about this particular prototype and whether or not any of the other inventors would kill for it. Talking to Nerni before her mother arrived would be critical for getting information, not to mention for my mental and physical well-being. Did I mention that Melda wasn't too pleased with me after my history with Nerni?

I set off back towards Fudnottin's place. I guess I'd have to stop thinking about it that way, but it was hard not to.

As if to mirror my mood, thick storm clouds rolled in and blanketed the Tiz. Great. Rain would put me in a better mood. I flicked Shira's reins to pick up the pace so I could be inside before the rain came down.

Just about the time we entered one of the district's major plazas, a steamworks factory on the far side emitted a low groan that sounded like a five-hundred-pound tiger in pain. Everyone in the plaza stopped to look at the building. I was no exception.

The groan abruptly stopped and a wet hissing replaced it. The sheet metal walls of the building bulged, and then rivets began to pop out and shoot in all directions. Everyone scrambled for safety and thankfully no one near me got hit.

Free from the rivets, the metal walls bent away from the frame all around the building. White clouds of steam erupted from the new holes and obscured the place. Now that the pressure had been relieved, the rivets no longer shot out, but people still ran from the building. The steam was probably hot enough to kill in seconds.

Next the steam flickered orange, no doubt from flames within. Black smoke curled out of the building and mixed with the steam that now dissipated in the fall air.

Most of us could do nothing but stare at the blaze. My mind was so wrapped up in Fud's death that I couldn't shift my thoughts to this new situation. Around me, a few brave souls ran to the doors of the burning building, and their action snapped me out of my daze. Jumping down from the cart, I ran forward to join them, but the intense heat from the fires inside radiated through the metal structure and kept us back. It was probably for the better. With that much heat, the doors would have warped and fused with the frame. No one would be getting in or out. I hoped that no one was inside when the fire started, but I didn't really believe that was the case. Hopefully they got out before the steam system blew.

Steam-powered factories had a tendency to malfunction since the technology was still new, but I'd never heard of one exploding. As we picked ourselves up, I spoke with the other witnesses. The general consensus was that a fire must have quickly spread throughout the factory, and the heat from the fire caused the steam system to overload. Most factories have strict fire control procedures to

prevent this sort of thing, but accidents do happen. The heart of the factory was a two-story, fire-driven boiler, after all.

As we watched, a gust of wind blew the smoke and steam away and revealed a robed figure balanced on a small rug that floated above the center of the building. Uh-oh. Maybe it wasn't an accident after all.

I wasn't the only one to spot the mage. The folks in the plaza cursed the mage and threw rocks and sticks, but the rug floated too far out of range. Technologists were the sort to own guns, so it was only a matter of time before the mage would be in serious danger. I didn't have much sympathy. With all the anti-mage sentiment festering in the Tiz, what was this mage thinking? For all their intelligence, the magi weren't very wise to be making enemies of the general populace.

The mage wasn't stupid enough to stick around, though. The rug lifted higher in the air and then the mage swooped off towards the Arcane Quarter. No reason to hide his destination. Magi weren't known for sneakiness.

After the mage left, the people in the plaza went back to tending their wounds. All the while, they eyed the roofline on the lookout for another mage to fly over. They looked patient. Soon they would look for revenge.

Once again, I wondered if a mage had killed Fud. Could Fud have done something to piss one of them off? A mage could have animated the clockwork, but that seemed a tad too subtle compared to the destruction I'd just seen.

The Watchmen arrived to take care of the situation, so I slipped away before they forced people to give their accounts of what happened. That would take all day, and I had to get back to speak to Nerni before her mother arrived.

#

Nerni's front door remained locked, so I knocked and figured that I'd made it in time. Thanks to the explosion, the crowd out front had dissipated for the most part, though a few stragglers remained with nothing better to do than to sit around on the ubiquitous weather-beaten old wooden barrels and crates lining the street. These containers built up throughout the spring, summer, and fall as deliveries were made, but they tended not to move after that. Sure, sometimes they would be reused to deliver something else, but for the most part they just sat around until winter, when they finally got burned as fuel.

A rusty clockwork that resembled a bear and groaned like a knight in corroded armor hurried up the street, pushing an empty wheelbarrow, no doubt to clean up after the explosion--those things were efficient. I watched it go by, weaving its way through the people but otherwise oblivious to the world around it. I wondered if it knew what its cousin had done to Fud, or if it would care.

Nerni opened the door looking much better than she had when I'd left. I couldn't help but see her as she had been when we first met--cute and single--but I had too much on my mind, so the feelings passed.

"Hi, Zook." Her voice sounded better, steadier than before, but she seemed oblivious to the explosion and the commotion a few streets over, so I thought it best to avoid the topic. She brought me to the kitchen, where a large pot of tea brewed away. "I made it for the mortician from the precinct, but he didn't take any." I told

her I'd have some, no milk, no sugar. She poured a steaming mugful for each of us and sat across from me at the kitchen table. "I tried to watch, but I couldn't bear it." Honey, like liquid gold, oozed from her teaspoon into her mug where it disappeared. For a moment, the only sound was the steady clanking of her spoon in the mug as she stirred in the honey. It was alchemy of sorts, but the final product wasn't the important part. The stirring, the process, the ritual of making tea helped her stay focused, helped her avoid thinking about what had happened to her husband. "They took him--his body--to the morgue, but I still can't go in there," she gestured towards the workshop, "not with all the blood everywhere."

I took her hand and got her to focus her eyes on me, to stave off the impending sorrow that crept into her voice and threatened to take over.

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure Melda will be happy to take care of it and spare you the pain." I suppose I shouldn't wonder why her mother hated me, but I couldn't resist torturing the old harpy. She'd had it in for me since before Nerni and I had our fling, and that hadn't helped matters.

Nerni smiled and told me what a good friend I was. With her hand still in mine, I hated myself for what I was about to do, but I needed to ask her more questions, to probe deeper into what had been going on before the clockwork killed Fud.

"Nerni, the prototype clearly did it. I have no doubt. The thing had bits of... let's just say the investigator's correct." I could see in her face that she wasn't ready to hear the details.

"But I told you it couldn't have. The hydraulic fluid... I don't understand."

"Could a mage have done it? They can manipulate objects with their magic, and they have been causing trouble lately."

"I suppose. But why Fud?"

"Are there any magi that might want him dead? Any that hate him?"

"Well..."

"What? Do you know who it might be?"

"Back before we met, Fud took on an apprentice. A gnomish girl named Egna. She didn't work out."

"What happened?"

"No talent for technology. Fud had to tell her to find something else to do. She didn't take it well."

"I can imagine. Masters rarely tell their apprentices to take a hike."

"She was bad. Technology seemed to hate her. Nothing she built worked, and anything she touched would develop problems. She had no future in our line of work."

"So what did she do instead?"

"Last I heard, she had apprenticed with a mage and was doing well. I don't know if she still mad at Fud, but I'm glad she discovered her true talent."

"Egna, eh? Does she have a last name?"

"Worthcastle. Egna Worthcastle. But we haven't seen or heard from her in years."

"She sounds like a potential suspect, but if she's been out of the picture for years, she's a long shot."

"If it wasn't her, who else could it have been?" She pleaded me with her eyes to give her some hope for an answer.

"Funny you should ask. What can you tell me about the prototype you and Fudnottin were working on? Apparently he celebrated and told the guys down at the Lamb and Sprocket about his new invention. I know what you said before, but they were eager to hear all the details, so I wondered if one of them might be involved."

"I can't believe any of them could have done it. We've always had a friendly competition around here. Even if they knew we'd developed something revolutionary, they would have cheered us on."

"What's so special about this prototype?"

"Well, it uses a new generation of control box." Once she got started talking about her work, she slipped into engineer mode and the grief disappeared from her voice. She sat up straighter and took on a schoolmarm attitude. "Instead of hard-coding the clockwork's protocol with traditional gears, we've come up with a way to use variable-tooth gears, sliding sprockets, adjustable tension springs, and tunable dashpots," she ticked them off one by one on her hand, "to allow us to alter the protocol after the control box is built and installed. To be able to re-program it, if you will."

"Wow, that does sound impressive. But remember, I'm just a lowly alchemist who has never owned a clockwork before. What does that mean exactly?"

"You still don't have a clockwork? Not even a rat to keep the pests out of your shop? I'll have to make you one for your birthday." She turned and looked at the ceiling. "Wait, didn't I make one for you already?"

"It must have been someone else," whoops, "but please, you were saying . . ."

"Right. Normally clockworks are programmed when they are built, and the protocol can't be changed. This re-programmable clockwork will change all that. It means you can use the same one for many different tasks. When we go into production and start selling it, we'll take over the market!"

Her excitement carried her for a few seconds after she stopped, but then the realization that she would be going into production alone must have hit her.

No sounds came out this time--she was done crying for now--but an ever so slight shudder crept through her small frame. I watched it spread upward until it hit her head. Her face scrunched up for a moment, but then the spasm passed. She kept her eyes closed for a second longer, and then spoke again.

"I suppose if someone were greedy enough, they might kill for our secrets, but I still can't imagine anyone around here doing that."

"Well, keep thinking about it; maybe someone will come to mind. I need to go check on something now," and escape before Lumo brings your mother here. "Will you be okay?" She nodded as I got up. "Good, now be sure to lock the door behind me."

Before I could escape, the front door opened and a throaty screech that could frighten ogre children shattered the peace. Nerni led the way to the foyer and

hugged her mother. Lumo stood there, shoulders slumped, holding a crate of steaming packages. He looked like he needed a hug too--and who wouldn't after walking across town with the Incarnation of Irritation--but he stood too close to Melda, so I left him to recover on his own. I did give him a thumbs-up, though. It's almost like a hug.

"Terpin! You insensitive cretin! How could you wait so long to bring me here to help my daughter? And how dare you send a filthy goblin to fetch me like some sort of vagabond? And what's with all of the racket and hurrying about on the streets? Really!"

"Melda, you are such a treasure. I wish I could have come, but sadly, I had to assist Nerni. I do hope Lumo didn't manhandle you too terribly." It's hard to be nice when you are the target of the furious attention of three feet of wrinkly ire. At least I could look down on her.

"Bah!" She had finished with me and took Nerni by the arm to the kitchen. Lumo and I followed. He set the crate on the table and plopped into a chair.

"Mum, don't be mean. Lumo is a perfect gentleman beneath his scaly skin. He was nice enough to fetch you and carry your crate, wasn't he?"

"Hey! You stick up for Lumo and not me?" Everyone is a saint except for Zook. My life can be so trying.

"Zook is a gentleman too, Mum. I asked him to look after Fud and help me with the arrangements." I raised an eyebrow at Nerni, but she shook her head. Probably didn't want to worry Old Melda.

"Feh. If he is such a gentleman, why did he take advantage of you?"

"Mum, I asked you not to bring that up again. I told you he didn't take advantage of me."

I gave Melda my best cherub smile. She rolled her eyes and set about opening the packages. They turned out to be hot rolls, stewed cabbage, and roasted chicken that must have come from nearby to still be steaming after a trip in the cold weather.

"Look, Melda, I can't tell you what a pleasure it has been to see you again," none whatsoever, "but I'm afraid I have to go take care of some business. I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm glad you're here now to help Nerni. If Lumo can assist in any way, just ask. He'll cater to your every whim." I hadn't realized that goblin eyelids could open so far. "Nerni, I'll take care of the business we discussed. Don't worry."

Nerni and I said our goodbyes under Melda's disapproving glare and I went on my way. On the way out I spoke to Lumo in private.

"I want you to guard them tonight. Fud might have been murdered, and whoever did it might come back. I doubt it, but I'll feel better if you're here. Besides, Nerni might need someone to entertain her mother."

"Don't worry, Boss, I'll take care of them." His gaze tiptoed back toward the kitchen. "Maybe I'll patrol around out here."

I glanced back at the kitchen. "Good idea. You can come back in the morning. If anything is going to happen, it'll be at night."

#

I headed home to work on Magus Seebert's order; it was only fair that I do it since Lumo handled the dirty job. Pondering the murder as I walked, I tried to work the leads out into a semblance of order. It had been too long since I'd really had to think through a problem like this one, and I couldn't juggle the pieces of information. Motives, opportunities, means. Thinking about one sparked ideas about another. I shook my head to clear it and took a methodical approach.

One: the prototype clockwork ripped Fudnottin to shreds.

Two: the prototype had been drained of hydraulic fluid and the system had been flushed and cleaned. Nerni said it had been done before the murder, but the prototype wouldn't have been able to move without it.

Three: Fudnottin had received some of the ubiquitous hate mail, but that didn't really mean much.

Four: Fudnottin had an old apprentice who was now a mage and maybe held a grudge, but she hadn't been heard from in years.

Five: some magi could manipulate objects with their power. Did they need to see the object they were moving?

Six: Fudnottin had spilled the beans about the prototype, and all the other inventors in the area knew about it.

Seven: the secrets of the prototype would make whoever owned them very rich, but the clockwork community was small enough that no one could hide if they stole another person's work.

Eight: the building's doors were locked tightly with only Fudnottin and Nerni inside.

The River Walk was as crowded as every evening, but all of a sudden the people's voices muffled to silence as if I was sinking underwater. The light from the street lamps seemed to dim, fading into the night. A pressure built in my head as I tried to avoid the thought, but I couldn't prevent it from surfacing from my unconscious . . .

Nine: most of the time the spouse is the murderer.

No, that can't be true.

Yes, look at the evidence. The simplest explanation is usually correct.

I didn't even want to consider it, but now that the thought had formed, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I saw the people around me, but I couldn't hear them. I felt like I was outside my body, floating behind and watching the action. I lurched forward, bumping into people, no longer in control of my own movements. The thud of my shoulder striking an unyielding hip stopped me in my tracks.

Then I looked up into a pair of red eyes that bugged out of a green, leathery face full of tusks and scars. Full-blooded orcs were rare in the urban areas, and with good reason; they aren't known for their good tempers and ability to get along well with others. This one didn't have the traditional spiky steel armor and six-foot claymore, but that didn't mean I wasn't in trouble. Well, bring it on. If I couldn't rationalize my logic and emotion, at least I could take out my frustration on a stinkin' orc. I twirled my cane up to an offensive position and prepared to fight.

"Ha ha ha, runtie! Do that again!"

Huh? "What? Do what again?"

"Do that trick. Do that thing with the stick for Og. Og liked that trick."

Not really sure what to do, I twirled my cane around into a defensive posture. Og clapped his big hands together and made a little squeaking sound that I could only guess was laughter. I did one of my fancier moves that involves hooking the crook around my neck and making the stick twirl around by rolling my upper body in a circle. It isn't very effective in a fight, but it got Og cheering.

"That so funny when you do that! Og like you. Og loves city. So fun. You even more fun to watch than the elves."

"Elves? Where?" I hate elves.

Ever since they lost their Mother Tree, elves had reverted to an earlier state of evolution. They lost their wonderful intelligence, although they were still clever and quick. In many ways, they now more closely resembled the pixies and fairies and other Fae creatures instead of the race of wise ancients they once were. They had even gotten shorter, as if the Mother Tree had amplified them when it had been alive. It was sad, really. When it first happened I had a lot of sympathy and gave donations to the relief funds. But before long, the elves realized they could get by without working and live on handouts. Some still retained a part of their intelligence although they were definitely changed. So I knew it was possible for them to survive the loss of the Mother Tree. When most of them resorted to behaving like spoiled brats and beggars, I lost my respect for the elves. Roving gangs of the pests infested the whole city, and they had a reputation for becoming violent and taking "donations" by force if they couldn't get them willingly. So I wouldn't get in trouble for picking a fight, and it was the perfect way to vent my frustration.

Og pointed up the road a little ways, and sure enough, a pack of elves congregated around a wooden bench illuminated by a lonely street lamp that overlooked the river, accosting the passers-by. That was really the only way to describe how they hung out: clumped in a pack and jumping like hyper frogs in a pond made of coffee.

I gave Og a friendly tap on the chest with the butt of my cane--I'd spent enough time in orc caves to know the proper formalities.

"Sorry, Og, I've gotta go."

"Aww. Bye-bye, funny runtie." He smacked me on the side of my head and sent me stumbling. Orcs never could figure out how to treat us short people, so they usually opted for the formalities reserved for children. I thanked the gods that I hadn't been born an orc.

As I approached the bench, I could hear the high-pitched voices of the elves. Most people now knew to give elves a wide berth, but when the streets were crowded, folks would push their luck and walk closer than they should. An elderly human couple passed too close to the elf-infested bench, and three of the punks sprang out to accost them. They didn't physically touch the humans, but they came within a fraction of an inch.

"Gimme some plats *plz!* HAHHAHAHA!" The tallest elf jumped up on his short friend who had crouched down in front of the man, preventing his passage. The tall one stuck his face forward so he was eye-to-eye with the man and held out his hands. The man jumped back and cried out while raising his arms as if deflecting blows.

Meanwhile, the third elf, a girl, played puppy dog to the woman. Shoulders slumped and head cocked to one side, she looked the perfect poor street urchin--she even wore raggedy clothing.

"You got any spare stuff for me?"

The woman just stared back, opened-mouthed, not sure what to do.

I sprinted toward them, my cane leading the way with its business end forward. Venting my frustrations on a gaggle of elves would be even better than fighting the orc. A few elves sat on the river railing, so I briefly considered a detour to knock them in but decided instead to keep going and rescue the couple. The man was closer, so I bowled into the pair of elves accosting him, knocking the tall one to the ground. My momentum carried me forward and I tripped over the short one and landed on him with an umph.

"Hey! *Wtf?*" Not even a child can whine like an elf.

The other elves hopped around even more as they jeered me and cheered on their friends, but they didn't bother leaving the bench. They thought it was all too hilarious and yelled out words of encouragement to their peers.

"HAHAHAHA!" "*Omfg lamer!*" "*Ur roxored!*" And of course the one elfish saying that always set my teeth grinding: "*Pwnd!*" I wished I had a potion that would help me forget their language, now that they filled it with such inane phrases.

We stood, and I yelled at the man and his wife to get out of there. They did, and the three elves I'd interrupted turned their attention to me. Standing in the center of the triangle of elves, I had to keep turning around to see them all. I kept my cane at the ready.

"Why don't you pick on someone who'll fight back, you punks?"

"*Stfu noob!*"

"*U suxor!*"

"Runt, we *leet*, you dead!" With that they attacked.

All three sprang forward and tried to grab me, but I was too quick. I charged the short one and smacked him on the forehead with my cane as I passed. He went down like a sack of kittens, all twitching and squealing. I twirled again, and the glint of a knife made me get serious.

The tall one now had a dirk in his hand--I guess outnumbering a gnome wasn't enough of an advantage. I swung my cane in a big arc as I turned, but the two elves still in the action jumped out of the way before I could catch a limb with the crook. Damn their nimbleness. I took a few more swipes, but dirk-boy and his girlfriend kept out of reach and continued to circle me. The rest of the elves hung around in the background, content to point and laugh at us while they jumped around and poked one another.

I gestured for them to bring it on, but they just circled until I got dizzy. Finally they both attacked. Dirk-boy lunged towards my chest. I was so busy

watching him that I didn't see his girlfriend, but I did feel her when I backed over her. She must have crouched down to trip me when dirk-boy attacked, and I fell for it. Unfortunately for her, I was too short to fall all the way to the far side. Instead, I wound up on top of her, back to back, with my face up towards the sky.

The impact knocked the cane from my hands, and dirk-boy kicked it away as he continued toward me. With his friend squirming beneath me, I had a hard time finding my balance, so instead I fumbled for my belt. I kept the potions in specific places so I wouldn't have to hunt for them in an emergency such as this, but while I reached around to the padded pouch, dirk-boy struck at my chest. His friend rolled at the right moment so the dirk went through my left arm. The blade was thin and sharp, so I didn't feel the pain at first, but when I did, it was like a ten-foot crab had pinched my arm. The blade must have gone all the way through and into the other elf, because she screamed.

Meanwhile, I got the vial I had been searching for. I'd used the belt so many times in the past that I didn't even have to think about it. It was easy to slip back into my old habits, and as soon as I felt the disk-shaped vial, I knew it was the powerful irritant I wanted. The potion came from the scent glands of a beetle that lived on pepper plants. It ate the hot peppers and concentrated the spice in the gland. I've heard rumors that some chefs in the southern countries use the glands for cooking, but up here we put it to more civilized use: personal protection.

With the vial in the palm of my right hand, I pushed up and smacked dirk-boy in the face. Since the glass broke, that wasn't the preferred method of delivery, but it worked. Broken glass and spicy extract ground into my hand and his face. My hands were tough and calloused from years of adventuring and hard work gathering ingredients. His face was soft and beautiful from years of being an elf. You can guess which was worse off.

He screamed and reared up, yanking the dirk out of my arm. His left hand scrambled at his face in a vain attempt to clear his vision and stop the pain. Meanwhile, my own hand burned as the extract seeped into the wounds caused by the glass. Dirk-boy couldn't see, but now he really must have wanted to hurt me, since he plunged the blade back down towards me.

I saw it coming and rolled sideways off his girlfriend just in time to avoid the steely death. She yelped as the dirk struck her back. Dirk-boy must not have realized I was gone, because he reached up and stabbed again and again.

The sight of their friend getting killed finally motivated the spectating elves to join the fun. They pulled their buddy back and held him down so they could wipe his eyes. While that went on, I yanked my cane out of the hands of a bystander who had claimed it and I strode over to dirk-boy held down by his friends, but able to see again. Their voices fell silent, except for the girlfriend moaning on the ground with blood leaking out of her back, and they watched me approach. I lunged with the business end of the cane but stopped before it hit dirk-boy in the face.

"Pwnd." With that I turned and walked away. Their sounds of laughter drowned out the moaning. Elves were bad about holding grudges, but if you knew how to speak their language, even this bastardized new version of it, they would

usually decide that you were just playing. Modern elves had a strange notion about what constituted playing, but hey, so did I.

#

I walked along the river willing myself to calm down after the fight. It had gotten me so distracted that I didn't even notice the pain in my hand. Then I remembered what had set off my foul mood earlier: the evidence. It all pointed to Nerni. She had a motive: more money for her, although I didn't think she cared about that. She had the opportunity: the doors were all locked, although I suppose someone could have come in through a window. The real kicker, though, was the clockwork itself. She could have altered its program to kill Fud. She had the knowledge, and she could have drained the hydraulic fuel afterwards. But if she had done it, why didn't she go along with Investigator Tillman's notion that it was an accident? She should have wanted everyone to believe that, unless she really didn't do it--which I wanted to believe--or else she had a different motive altogether, in which case I had no idea what was going on.

I reached my home without further incident, though as soon as I thought that, I wondered when I'd started thinking of it as my home instead of my shop. When I'd first bought the place, I slept in the upstairs room because I didn't have any place else, but after a while, I gave up on the notion of getting a real home. I guess growing up in a gnomish town makes you think that everyone has separate home and work buildings. I'd later found out that wasn't true in rural villages or big cities--well, except for the big factories--but I'd never really believed I'd think that way. I guess I was settling down. Now, there's a scary thought.

Now that the adrenaline from the fight had worn off, the pain in my hand from the fight kicked in. A few splashes from a healing potion took care of that, leaving me free to ponder the situation.

As I prepared a simple dinner, my thoughts wouldn't stop racing around. Maybe I still suffered from the aftereffects of being in a street fight. Maybe I had come up with too many possibilities for what happened to Fud. Maybe I truly suspected Nerni and couldn't bring myself to follow through with that conclusion.

After dinner I tried to read to clear my mind. It didn't work. I jotted down my thoughts, and that helped organize my thinking. I managed to convince myself that Eгна Worthcastle, the failed apprentice, made for a likelier suspect than Nerni. In the morning I would have to go pay her a visit and find out if she was involved.

How hard would that be?

I woke up feeling much better, but then again everything looks better in the light of a new day after you've rested. Well, that's not true. Back in my youth, I occasionally drank too much and wasn't so thrilled by the sight of the woman I had met at the bar the previous night and brought home. I'm just glad that I managed to grow out of that phase.

I threw on a robe and went downstairs to fix myself some breakfast. While I cooked up some eggs, I planned out my day. In the light of a new dawn, Egna Worthcastle still seemed like the most likely suspect. I needed to go visit her, but I wasn't so stupid to think that I could just show up at a mage's house and accuse her of murder without risking being disintegrated or becoming embroiled in the baffling process that passes for a legal system in the Arcane Quarter. Since the City Watch pretty much leaves them to govern themselves inside the Quarter, they would be free to do with me what they would, and there would be no repercussions.

Fortunately, I had a perfect excuse for going there and introducing myself to a mage I had never met. Yes, it was time for a marketing field trip.

I cleaned up from breakfast just in time to greet Lumo as he stumbled up from the basement.

"Wait. Weren't you at Nerni's?"

"Uh-huh. Melda kept me up half the night talking after Nerni went to bed. I stayed there until dawn and, uh, decided to leave before they got up. I left a note."

"You ducked out, eh?"

"Well, um, I had to work on one of my personal projects. You know, before you got up and made me do something."

"Really? In that case, I should go check out this project of yours. Before we do that, though, I wanted to thank you for keeping an eye on the ladies. I really appreciate it. I didn't think anything would happen, but you never know. Here, eat up, I saved you some breakfast."

"All right!"

While Lumo stuffed eggs down his gullet with a wooden spoon in each hand, I explained everything I had learned yesterday about Egna. I told him about my plan to introduce myself to her through the excuse of a marketing trip. I wanted to feel her out to see if she might be responsible for Fud's murder, but I didn't want her to know that's what I was doing.

When he finished, he took me down to the laboratory to show off his pet project.

"What do you have going on there?" I pointed at the beaker that simmered over a small burner.

"Oh, that's just--"

"Wait, wait. Don't tell me." He rolled his eyes, but I moved into the peer closer at the experiment. "Medium to high viscosity. Dark green color. Perhaps ten percent opacity." I wafted my hand across the top of the beaker to get a good sniff without exposing my nostrils to be potentially harmful fumes. It doesn't take much to be able to get the odor of something. Only an amateur sticks their nose where it doesn't belong. "A base of Green Vitriol and hints of Butter of Tin and Glauber's

Salt. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were making a love potion and you're using my formula as a starting point. Am I right?"

"Yep. That's right, Boss. They sell well and I need to start building up my own inventory."

I nodded. I could see the early signs of his thinking beyond the beaker. To be a successful alchemist, he had to be good with business as well as making potions.

"Absolutely. But you know, people associate red or pink with love potions. Green is often associated with things that are toxic, or vegetables. Choosing the right color is a big part of creating a potion that will sell well."

"Ah," he waved his long finger at me and smiled, "but you don't know my market. For goblins, green is good."

"You have a point there. Nice work."

He congratulated himself by raising his hands slightly in a silent cheer.

"Can these sit for a while? I need your help loading the samples in to the cart for my marketing trip."

"Yeah, they'll be fine. Can I come with?"

I thought about it for a moment. I didn't want to drag him into potential trouble, but it would be good to have backup. I couldn't protect him forever.

"Sure, it'll be good experience for you. But I do have to warn you, this is not an ordinary marketing trip. You might want to stash your club in the cart, just in case we run into trouble." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "You know how magi are. Better safe than sorry."

"This should be fun."

"Just don't do anything to tip her off. If she did it, and she knows that we know she did it, things could get ugly."

"You don't have to tell me that. I'm not stupid. So, what do we bring on a marketing trip?"

"I thought you said you weren't stupid. Why don't you tell me what we should bring?"

He thought for a moment, but I could tell by the way he scratched his chin and stared off into space that the answer wasn't coming. Time to be a good teacher and lead him to the correct answer.

"Do you think she'll be a business or personal potion buyer?"

"I don't know? How do I figure that out?"

"Well, you don't really have to. Business customers are generally higher volume buyers, so they're a more lucrative business. You should always try to cultivate them as your primary source of income. Treat the people who buy potions for their personal use as a source of supplemental income. Don't rely on it, though, because you can't easily predict how much you'll sell in any given month." He nodded along as I was speaking. I could see the information filtering its way into the dark recesses of his brain. Once he assimilated it, he'd be able to put it to use in his ever-growing toolbox of business skills.

"Okay. So that means that we should bring an assortment of potions that other magi buy regularly."

"Precisely." I patted him on the back. "All of these lessons must be sinking in. I can really see the difference between now and when you first started."

"Thanks, Boss."

Together we selected a wide assortment of potions that are popular amongst the finger wagers. They tend to like the extracts of various sorts--I suppose they are useful for amplifying the effects of their spells. Essential oils were also popular. Really, anything that was pure and concentrated. Magi rarely purchased complex potions. They probably considered it a point of honor to create the potions themselves.

Once we laid out all the bottles and vials that we wanted to bring, I left Lumo to load the cart and hook up Shira. I told him to wear his best outfit, but I didn't bother specifying since I knew he only had one. I, on the other hand, needed some time to ponder. A businesslike outfit, obviously, but there were subtleties to consider. We were talking about a female gnome. Should I fine-tune the outfit to distract her? That might make her more talkative, and of course it might garner me some new business--if she turned out to be innocent, why waste the opportunity?

On the other hand, she might have orchestrated Fud's murder. Maybe I should go for something a little intimidating?

In the end, I went for take-me-seriously business with a hint of maybe-I'll-see-you-after-work enticing. It was the forest green silk shirt with one button too many left undone at the top that really pulled it all together.

Satisfied, I collected my cloak and cane and met Lumo out front. He sat in the driver's seat wearing a simple outfit that was appropriate for an apprentice. Even better, it was relatively stain-free. I hopped on board and gave him the signal to get moving.

The Arcane Quarter lies shoreward from Downsfield, so we traveled along River Walk away from the Tiz. Perhaps it was symbolic that we were traveling in the opposite direction I had traveled yesterday morning. Or maybe I was wasting mental energy while not getting myself ready for the upcoming confrontation.

From River Walk, we turned north and passed through the gate into the Arcane Quarter. The Quarter is surrounded by a stone wall said to have been raised out of the ground during Erona's expansion days by a group of geomancers who were annoyed by all the regular people moving into the area. They walled off a circular section just north of the river that encompassed the hill where the magi school stood and a sizeable chunk of flatland surrounding it.

The district had at least five distinct neighborhoods in addition to the campus of the magic school that covered the flat top of the hill at the center. Four of the areas corresponded to the four roads that spiraled down the hill from the school. Each road started at a gate in the school's wall that crowned the hill—one road for each compass direction. Magi from specific schools of study segregated themselves by road, and the more powerful lived higher on the hill like royalty or celebrities. The run-of-the-mill magi and folks with lower means lived in the flat area between the base of the hill and the outer wall. In the south part of the Quarter near River Walk, the buildings were mostly commercial. On the opposite end of the district lay a tightly packed nest of cheap apartments. Better than a slum, but not by much.

The architecture of the Arcane Quarter matched the personalities of the magi who lived there. The buildings were tall and narrow, with a preponderance of towers and cellars. I guess the magi like the vertical more than the horizontal. Odd that the technologists were the opposite, but then I suppose they needed large spread-out warehouses for their mechanical constructions. Why the magi liked them tall I didn't know--maybe I would ask one someday, but I didn't really care that much. Probably they just wanted a better view than their neighbors.

They also seemed to favor stone construction, which I suppose is a good thing when you work with the vast energies associated with arcane magic. I wondered for a moment if having all the magi in such close quarters affected their magic, but then that pesky not-really-caring distracted me and turned my attention to the crowd that had gathered in the street in front of a small tower with slate walls near the base of the hill.

They weren't the ne'er-do-well onlookers that you get in the Tiz, nor the protestors and concerned citizens at the Civic Plaza. No, this was the kind of gawking yokel crowd that shows up whenever there's a fire or an execution. Listening to the murmurs of the crowd, I gathered that the mage who lived inside was the prime suspect in the steamworks factory fire the day before.

It took a lot to bring the City Watch into the Quarter, given the tenuous relationship between the city government and the magi. Apparently blowing up a building in another district crossed the line. A group of ten Watchmen surrounded the tower and tried to extract the mage, but she didn't want to come peacefully. The City Watch didn't hire idiots--well, not too many at least--so they were reluctant to go in and force her out. She wasn't one of my customers, so we kept going and I silently wished them luck. Magi weren't known for being very accepting of authority.

As we drove away, I caught the distinctive whiff of ozone over the rest of the interesting odors in the neighborhood. That wasn't a good sign for the Watchmen. Sure enough, the clouds thickened and grew dark as lightning struck. I really didn't want us to be there when the mage unleashed her power on the Watchmen, so I told Lumo to pick up the pace. The City Watch really needed some magi or magi slayers of their own to deal with problems like this one.

The Arcane Quarter is not designed to make life easy for visitors. I had no idea where Egna lived, and there was no public directory to make it easy to find out. My only option was to ask someone, which meant finding a local tavern keeper who knew her, or asking one of my customers. If she were an alcoholic, then it would be a good bet that the tavern keepers knew her. On the other hand, they might not be so inclined to send a salesperson to come visit one of their better customers. And that meant that we would have to go visit Magus Seebert.

Magus Seebert is a rather talkative fellow, so it would be difficult to simply get information from him. He would want to have a nice conversation and perhaps some tea, and since I suspected one of his colleagues of foul play, I couldn't really explain why we were in a hurry today. It would be especially difficult to extract ourselves, because we owed him a batch of Wisp Extract. Seebert was the kind of

customer who felt that he owned your time and attention until the transaction had been completed. Still, we didn't have much choice.

Seebert had been around for a while and was considered one of the elders of the Arcane Quarter. He never involved himself in the local politics, but everyone respected him and his opinions. Consequently, he was able to convert the respect into prime housing. There's no room to build new towers in the Quarter, and vacancies rarely open. When a four-story Kavian style tower close to the top of the North Spiral Road opened up, Seebert made a bid. Nobody wanted to get on his bad side, so no one bid against him.

We tied to Shira up out front and left the cart unattended. Seebert would be offended if he didn't have a chance to chat with Lumo, and there wasn't much chance that somebody would mess with the cart belonging to one of Seebert's guests.

His front door was one massive piece of oak bound with brass that was polished like a mirror. The brass was cut with the typical Kavian flair: lots of points that matched the overall tower design. The effect was quite exotic during the day, and quite sinister at night. At the center of the door was a brass knocker crafted to look like a lotus flower. It looked great, but it was a bit awkward for knocking. I guess the designer opted for form over function.

We knocked and waited. A few minutes later, the massive door swung open revealing a pixie. She hung in the air, fluttering her little wings, inspecting the two of us. Seebert must have been getting ready to have a party--he didn't usually summon fairy servants. He was the kind of guy who liked to do everything himself.

"Do you have an appointment?" The fairy looked annoyed by our intrusion. Her arms were crossed, and she tapped her foot, but instead of looking annoyed, she looked funny since she still floated four feet off the ground.

"No, but Magus Seebert is one of my customers. I have a small matter that needs clearing up. It won't take long."

"Ha. Then you obviously don't know Magus Seebert."

I laughed back and we shared a little moment. We had both clearly worked for Seebert before, and I knew she'd let us in. Sure enough, she waved us in and lead us back to Seebert's parlor. He sat at a table bent over a large book, scrawling something on the pages and muttering, oblivious to everything going on around him. Pixies fluttered about cleaning everything from the chandeliers to the furniture and attaching decorations all over.

"Magus Seebert, I hate to disturb your preparations, but you have some visitors with important business to discuss."

Magus Seebert raised his head and wore a look of confusion. He was an ancient human with close-cropped white hair. His sideburns flowed down into one of those weird-looking beards that runs along the chin but doesn't quite manage to make it onto the face. I kept expecting him to have a mustache, but he never did, no matter how many times I looked. If he grew his hair and odd beard out long and flowing, he would look like a lion, so it was a good thing he kept them short.

It only took a moment for recognition to spread across his face.

"Ah, Master Terpin. How excellent to see you. I apologize, I must have lost track of the month. I didn't realize that it was already time to receive my Wisp

Extract. And a hello to you as well, Mr. Bogbug." Lumo liked Magus Seebert because Seebert treated him as a real person, unlike many customers who ignore the presence of an apprentice.

"Actually, your sense of timing is just fine. We're still working on the extract and we'll deliver it shortly."

"Oh?" He leaned back in his chair and folded his fingers in front of his face. "Do tell. What brings you to my parlor? A social visit perhaps? Perhaps you desire a thought-provoking conversation on matters arcane in nature?"

"No, actually we have come to ask you a question about one of your colleagues."

"Oh well, an old man can hope. Though to be honest, I have so many preparations for tonight that I would not have been able to fully devote my attention to our conversation should we have had it. Well then, in the interest of brevity, please ask your question."

"Do you know Egna Worthcastle? Or more importantly, do you know where she lives?"

"Egna Worthcastle. Let me see. The name seems somewhat familiar, but I can't quite place it. Do you have any other information that might jog my memory?"

"She's a gnome. Bit of a drinker. Apprenticed to a clocksmith before becoming a mage. Does any of that help?"

"Oh my, yes. Now I remember why that name is familiar. It seems her drinking caused her to become somewhat of a disgrace to the magi community recently."

"Really? How interesting. And just what is that she did to become such a disgrace?"

"Got into a tussle at a drinking establishment outside of the Quarter. As I heard it, she didn't much care for a malfunctioning clockwork contraption. Used her magic in a most uncivilized manner, and wound up spending the night with the city authorities. And you know how we magi like to distance ourselves from the city authorities." He shook his head and tsked while he recounted the tale.

"But she's home now? I'm interested in talking to her."

"I would assume so. But what on earth do you want to speak to her about?"

"I'm on a marketing field trip. Business has been kind of slow lately, despite your standing order for Wisp Extract. We need to drum up some new business, and I heard that she might be a good candidate for our products."

"Is that so? Well, your sense of timing is spot-on as well. The preparations that you see are for a party where there will be many magi who might be interested in partaking of your services. You would be more than welcome to come and mingle. I would be happy to put in a good word for you. And you should come as well, Mr. Bogbug. I worry that Master Terpin doesn't let you out of that smelly basement of yours enough."

I couldn't turn down an offer like that. Despite everything going on, I had a business to run, and the chance to network with Seebert's colleagues was too good an opportunity to pass up. Still, I needed to find Egna so I could feel her out in private.

"We would be delighted to come to your party. In fact, I should be able to bring your Wisp Extract when I come. I just hope there's some way I can reciprocate someday. In the meantime, however, we have a cart full of sample potions that I would like to show to Magus Worthcastle. Do you know where she lives, or how I could find out?"

"Certainly. Certainly. I'll send one of the pixies out to check the local directory. It won't take her long." He calls one of the pixies over and gave her the instructions. She flitted out one of the windows with a tinkle. "While we wait, I've had the most interesting notion concerning the fundamental magic that powers your potions."

Lumo slipped out of the room while Seebert put his arm around my shoulder and guided me to a pair of cushioned chairs in a book-lined alcove. I prayed the pixie was fast.

Fifteen agonizing minutes later, the pixie returned and gave me the directions to Egna's home. Seebert was disappointed to see us go, but he had plenty of preparations to keep him occupied. Besides, he said we would be able to continue our conversation this evening.

I collected Lumo from Seebert's library where he perused the alchemy section. We headed back outside, got the cart ready, and headed out.

The cart clattering its way across the paving stones provided the only sound as we traveled. I sat deep in thought about how to approach Egna and Lumo sat deep in thought staring at the attractive young apprentice magi wandering the streets. Goblins didn't usually get involved with interspecies relationships, but not by choice. If Lumo couldn't spot a fellow greenskin, he would be out of luck. Still, he could always enjoy looking at the women who would never consider going out with him.

Egna Worthcastle. Failed technologist. Presumably successful mage. Alcoholic. And now it seemed she was also capable of violence. I didn't know the details of her outburst at the tavern that landed her in the City Watch prison for the night, but I didn't really need to. The fact that she had done it was enough to raise my suspicions even more. Was she a killer?

As much as the magi like to consider themselves above the rest of us in every way, they still suffer from the same problems as everyone else. They like to give the impression that their intellect has led them to move beyond the petty desires of us common folk. That's just propaganda. Just like everyone else, they want to make money and live the good life. The most obvious example being that a powerful and famous mage like Seebert lives in what is essentially a mansion. It could be a lot more ostentatious, but in the end he has far more room than he could ever need. All of his neighbors live the same way.

In contrast, Egna's neighborhood located on the edge of the slum-like area in the north part of the Quarter. As we drove closer, the streets narrowed to allow more buildings to be packed in. The further away we got from River Walk, the less space there was between buildings. Not only that, but the streets were dirtier as well with bits of rubbish collected in the corners like leaves caught along the bank of a stream. By the time we got to Egna's place, the individual buildings had merged into what appeared to be one large dormitory. The building had narrow alleyways to

allow access, but they were covered over in order to provide more floor space for the tenants. Seebert must have thought it strange that I would be looking in this neighborhood for new clients.

We parked the cart as close as possible to Egna's apartment and hesitated. I didn't think anything would happen to the cart if we left it, but I wasn't positive. The area was not affluent, but it didn't seem particularly sketchy. I toyed with the idea of leaving Lumo with the cart, but in the end I figured that the bigger risk came from Egna. She was the unknown factor. The potential killer.

Lumo placed some samples in his pack, heaved it over his shoulder with a grunt, and then nodded that he was ready. We walked through her alley being careful not to step on anything. You never know what sort of failed experiments might be lurking around the gutters. The door crouched at the end of the alley between a family-sized refuse bin and a barrel filled with stagnant water. Egna's name engraved on a plaque next to the door assured me that it was her place and not the back door of a local dive. I knocked, halfway hoping that she wouldn't answer. I wasn't so lucky.

I would describe the room, but I was unable to see anything beyond the wall of pasty flesh that jiggled before me. You never expect to see overweight gnomes--it's not in our nature. Egna must have really let go of her self-control. It was a shame, because as a gnome, she approached being as wide as she was tall. I wish I could say that she wore it well, but her dress looked like a modified tent that was sprinkled with little bits of dandruff from her greasy black hair. She wasn't a pretty sight. She did, however, possess a penetrating voice when she spoke, I flinched a little, not suspecting such a deep sound to come out of a shorty.

"Who are you? Are you another prostitute? You're okay, but I told them no goblins." She stood there and looked me up and down. I did my best not cringe. I had prepared my best cold-calling material and had a whole script planned out my mind which would have resulted in her inviting me into view her laboratory. The prostitute comment threw me off, and I couldn't recover quickly enough to launch into my spiel. All I could think about was how glad I was that I wasn't a prostitute and how she clearly had no appreciation of high fashion.

"No! No. I'm an alchemist. I'm--"

"An alchemist? Well, what are you doing here? You do you know you're in the Arcane Quarter, don't you?"

"Ah, um, yes. I'm here looking for new customers."

"What did you come here for? Do I look like I could afford to pay someone else to make my potions? Who sent you?"

"Magus Seebert told me where to find you." That was true, and hopefully that would be enough so I wouldn't have to reveal the real reason I was there.

"Magus Seebert?" She barked out a laugh. "That pompous old windbag? I didn't think he even knew I existed."

"He did mention something about you getting into a little trouble lately."

"Oh, I see, this is about that. Are you even a real alchemist? Did that damn tavern owner pay you to come try and hustle more money out of me? I already paid the fine, and I only did that because the damn Magi Council didn't think I was worth their effort to protect."

She slammed her door shut in my face, but I was too quick for her. I wedged my cane into the door jamb causing the door to rebound and fly open, smacking into the wall. Some customers require more aggressive sales tactics than others. I stepped inside the rundown apartment that matched the decor of the alley and worked the Zook Terpin magic. Lumo had the good sense to hang back and let me work.

"That's not it at all. We're both gnomes. We both work with magic. I heard about your troubles and I wanted to offer my support. I understand the altercation had something to do with some faulty technology. I know exactly how you feel about all that." I waved my hand in the general direction of the Tiz. "I'm allowed to be picky when it comes to who I sell my products to come. After hearing your story, I thought you might be the right kind of person for me."

The ball of lightning that had been growing in her hand fizzled out and she gave me a second look over.

"Is that so?" She studied me for a moment longer. "Yeah, damn clockworks. Those things never work right. The owner of the tavern bought one to help with cleaning. The fact that he bought a clockwork instead of one of my products--me," she stabbed her finger at her chest, "a regular there--was bad enough. But then he let the thing roam around and bump into me every five minutes. Even then I ignored it." Wow. She really despised clockworks. I let her continue stomping around the room and ranting. "When that thing pinched my leg with its claw," she threw her hands up in the air and gave me a look of disdain, "I couldn't take it anymore."

"I know exactly how you feel. There's something unnatural about them." It's easy to sound convincing when you tell the truth.

"Unnatural? What are you, some sort of druid? They're no different than golems or animated skeletons, and those things have been around forever. No, the problem is that they're too unreliable. Too unpredictable. They may work fine for simple tasks, but they can't handle anything complex because there's no spark of life. No brain. When you summon a golem, you put a little piece of yourself inside of it. The essence of the creator lurks inside waiting in case the golem encounters a situation that goes beyond whatever it was commanded to do."

Uh oh. Eгна had slipped into sales pitch mode. I needed to force her off of her script, but no amount of looking away or clearing my throat could pause her recital. I let her continue, and looked for an opening.

"That lets it cope with any unpredicted situation that arises. As long as the creator wasn't stupid, the golem won't do anything stupid. A clockwork will just try to keep on doing a simple program no matter how the environment changes."

She paused and gave me my chance. If I could throw her off balance, she might admit to killing Fud.

"I never really thought about it that way. But on the other hand, most people can't summon a golem. You have to admit that clockworks can help make people's lives easier, albeit in a limited fashion." That should get her going.

"Maybe, but their use is so specific. In the long run, they won't last. Sure, they're helpful now, when people don't have any other alternative, but when something better comes along, all that metal will be rusty scrap."

"Yeah, but what else could replace them? Unattuned golems?"

She smiled and winked at me, causing her chubby face to pinch and distort in a most unattractive manner.

"Now you're starting to catch on."

Wait a minute. Was she trying to pitch a sale to me? If so, she was a pretty good salesperson and not the ranting lunatic I expected.

"Let me guess. You've come up with a way to summon golems that can be attuned to other people?"

"Not golems exactly. Come to my workshop. I think you'll appreciate my creations. You may even want to bring one home with you." She squeezed through a door at the far side of the room and then turned back to beckon for me to follow her. I admit that I was scared about what lay beyond the door. It could have been her bedroom.

I waved Lumo inside and ushered him towards the dark passageway beyond the door, but he was kind enough to let me go into the scary unknown first.

Cool air wafted through the doorway and brought odors reminiscent of Fud's workshop. Odd. I hadn't expected a mage to stockpile machined metal or grease in her workshop. I had to hope it was her workshop, because thinking it might be her bedroom caused a string of scandalous images to parade through my mind. I shuddered and tapped my head with my cane in a vain attempt to dislodge the brain cells responsible for the images.

Fortunately for my sanity, the passageway beyond the doorway did open up into a workshop.

I stopped short when I saw the room and earned a grumble from Lumo, who had to skip left to avoid running into me. The resemblance between this room and Fud's workshop were uncanny. It was much smaller--not surprising given her limited means--and the place showed a lack of attention to order, but the layout was identical. Bins of scrap metal lined the wall where Fud kept his neatly labeled boxes of spare parts. An overflowing chest whose lid hadn't met its matching base in eons squatted near the work benches at the center of the room and spewed forth rusty tools. Lumo bent over the pile and sneered. He knew that if he let his alchemy supplies reach that state, I'd throw him out on his butt. I gave him a little push but his balance was too good and he didn't notice. Or he was ignoring my lesson. Alchemy requires a steady hand. You can't risk falling over when working with caustic reagents. Also you shouldn't let your master go first into potentially embarrassing situations.

The biggest similarity between Eгна's and Fud's workshops was the inactive clockworks standing around in all the corners, under tables, and in every nook. Not exactly what I expected to find in the workshop of such an anti-clockwork mage.

"Well, boys, whadya think?"

"I'm shocked. What about you, Lumo?"

"Yeah, Boss. Shocked."

I rapped one of the clockworks with my cane, but it didn't move. The thing stood a foot tall and looked like a tail-less monkey. "So, I guess they aren't golems."

What about your anti-clockwork tirade back there?" I swung the cane back towards the front room. "I thought you didn't like automatons?"

"Oh, you just know everything, don't you, you big cutie?"

Right. The old Terpin charm must have been stronger than I thought. I hadn't even been trying.

"They sure look like clockworks," I said.

"Well, they're not. I used to make clockworks. Trust me. I know clockworks. These guys are my own creation. Metal bodies and golem spirits. They may look like clockworks on the outside, but inside they are pure golem."

"How did you do that?" If she told the truth, she had created something unique. I had to remind myself not to be impressed. After all, she looked more and more like the one responsible for Fud's death.

"I can't tell you the secret, but fundamentally it's the same as animating a pile of dirt. In some ways it's even easier, because you just have to give it enough energy to make the thing move. It doesn't have to hold its shape like a regular golem."

"Hmm, interesting," I said. "That makes sense. But why a metal golem?"

"Since it doesn't have to hold its shape, there is plenty of energy left over for holding the spirit. They can run for months without a fresh infusion of power. And when they do run out, you can bring them back to me for recharging. Not like a golem that turns into a dried up pile of dirt. Good for you and good for me."

"Ah, so that's the secret."

"Nope. The secret is how I infuse the metal with the animation energy, and I'll never tell. That'll keep customers coming back to me forever. Guaranteed revenue stream."

"A well thought out plan, but it begs a question."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"Why are you still living here? Why aren't you rich? No one wants to buy a golem that looks like a clockwork?"

"Well, I've sold a few, but I'm still working out all the problems."

"Gremlins in the machine, so to speak?"

"If only it were an infestation. No, it's like this...the golem-making spells are all tuned to dirt, mud, clay, and other earth-related materials. Necromancers have made golems out of flesh and body parts--"

"What? You know necromancy will get you executed if you get caught."

"Aww, concerned about me?" She fluttered her pudgy eyelids at me. "Don't worry. I did enough research to know people have done it. I didn't learn about how they did it, though. I just had to find out if it was possible to adapt the earth magic to other forms of matter."

"Metal comes from the earth. It shouldn't be too hard."

"True, but the metal that you use to construct a clockwork is a lot more ordered than your typical pile of dirt. It's almost like a crystal, and I've never found anyone who's made a crystal golem."

"And after doing all your research, you figured out a way to animate machines and make them do your bidding?"

"That's right, potion pusher. So are you going to buy one or what?"

I already knew she had motive, and she just told me that she had the means to make Fud's prototype kill him. I needed some evidence, though. Something that would convince Tillman to send his men here to do something about it. The City Watch didn't like coming to the Quarter, so it would have to be something definitive. I needed time to poke around without her watching. Lumo would be perfect.

"You know, I didn't come here looking to make a purchase, but you do make a strong case. Maybe I could poke around your workshop and see what models you have?" I figured that the lure of a potential sale would make her easier to manipulate.

"By all means. Let me show you what I have."

"Actually, I'd like to look around myself first. See if any of them call to me. In the meantime, maybe Lumo could tell you about what we have to offer you. What do you think, Lumo? Do you feel up to a little demonstration?"

"Oh yeah," he said, grinning and nodding his head. "I can do this." He cracked his knuckles and started on a rapid-fire speech that he had obviously over-prepared.

"Slow down," I said. "Give her a chance to hear you and maybe ask a question or two." I turned to Egna and smiled, trying to treat her as a peer.

"Apprentices. We were never that eager, were we?"

"Speak for yourself." She smiled back with perhaps a bit too much leer. Lumo saved me by drawing her attention to the samples he'd produced from his backpack.

Freed from scrutiny, I wandered to the nearest workbench and began my survey of her clockwork golems. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I hoped I'd recognize it when I saw it. What could she have here that would implicate her in Fud's murder? A detailed written plan? That would be too easy. Fud's clockwork killed him, so there wouldn't be any bloody rags to find in her workshop. In fact, for all I knew, she wouldn't have had to physically touch it to control the prototype. Maybe she had practiced with one of her golems? Controlled it from outside the room and had it kill a rat or something? Did any of them have blood on their hands?

None that I had examined so far, but there were lots of them, and they came in many shapes. Some of them didn't even have hands. Most looked like little people, about a foot tall. If you squinted, you might mistake one for a brownie. I focused my attention on those, but I did see some shaped like dogs, presumably for performing guard duty, and there were even a few shaped like turtles. I had no idea what purpose they served.

I'd made it about halfway around the room when I felt a hand reach around my waist. I was so startled that I jerked forward and knocked over one of the golems.

As I extricated myself from the metal, Egna's porcine laugh set my nerves on edge.

"I sent your apprentice out to bring in more of your potions to show me. I could lock the door..." She tried to use a sultry voice, but she had phlegm in her throat that made it come out as more of a wet rasp. Definitely not sexy.

"Ah, maybe not." I twisted away to unwind her groping arm. I still had my moves. "Tell me about these turtle things. What are they for?"

She sighed and looked at the golem I pointed out. "All business, huh? Your loss. Those are for parties. Do you like to party?"

Eww. The way she asked made me feel like I needed a bath.

"I host the occasional soiree. What does it do?"

"It has several attachments, but basically you load it up with drinks or food and it will slowly roam the room and make sure everyone has a chance to take what they want, staying out the guests' way all the time, of course. And the shell opens up to hold trash. When the tray is empty or the shell is full, it will return to the kitchen to be restocked and emptied. The perfect server. Efficient and unobtrusive. How many would you like?"

"I'm not sure I'd be able to put it to good use. What do you have for security? I saw the dogs...but I sometimes get junkies breaking in looking for recreational potions. They can go crazy when they can't find anything, so I would need something that could maim or kill." Why be subtle?

"Oh, yes. You could use a security dog golem. They don't sleep, they don't eat, and they won't be tricked by nature-based magic."

"And there's no problem with them killing?"

"The City Watch frowns on those sorts of orders, but screw the Watch. I can set you up. You should get two. Always important to have a backup in case one goes down. If you don't imprint it, they'll keep forever."

"Wait a minute. It might go down?" Ah good, an excuse to not buy one. "Is that one of the problems you mentioned?"

"No, no. What I meant to say was you want to have a second one ready to imprint and deploy so you'll stay protected while the first one is being recharged. They have very little downtime."

"I don't know. If I put my trust in it and then it stopped working, I could die. Or what if it turned on me. Maybe it's not such a good idea."

Lumo came back in and spared me from further discussion.

"I'll let you two get back to your potion talk. Be sure to ask Lumo about our clockwork lubricants. If your customers are going to keep a spare in the closet for long periods of time, the golems will need something that doesn't break down with inactivity. A lot of common lubricants are whale oil-based and can go rancid if they sit around too much."

She grumbled about not having problems, but Lumo played a good salesman and wouldn't take no for an answer. He dragged her over to a crate full of bottles and I got back to inspecting.

I took a closer look at all the security dog golems. She said they could be ordered to kill, but as far as I could tell, none of them had any blood on their teeth. Was she lying to get the sale, or had she cleaned up after testing them? There wasn't much I could do to tell for sure.

I wasn't getting anywhere hunting for clues. I needed to come up with a better plan. How could I get Egna to talk about Fud? Maybe I could get her talking about her past.

Lumo had her trapped at a table where he showed off his demonstration potions. I could tell from her body language--the tapping foot, the constant glances to the door and to me--that she wasn't interested. She must have been banking on me buying a golem, so she had to feign interest. She wouldn't be happy when she found out I wasn't a customer. Lumo continued talking, oblivious to her non-verbal clues. I'd have to talk to him about that later.

If I rescued her from Lumo, she might be willing to chat. I wandered over and gave her a knowing wink and smile when I caught her eye.

"So Egna, how is Lumo's pitch going?"

"He, um, certainly knows his details. Every little one."

"I think you've probably heard enough." I said. "Why don't you and I talk business?"

"Oh, gods yes."

I told Lumo to pack up and load the cart so Egna and I could speak in private. After observing her, I figured that I'd be able to handle her if she turned violent, and I worried that she wouldn't be as open with Lumo around.

We walked over to look at one of the dog models. I started the conversation.

"I can't get over how much they look like clockworks. And how did you ever come up with the idea of making a metal golem?"

"Well, I tell ya. I wasn't always a mage."

"Oh? Really?"

"Yup. Before I came to the Quarter, I was an apprentice clockwork maker. Worked for a guy over in the Tiz."

"Heh. I never would have guessed. You seem so anti-clockwork. What's the story behind that?"

"I hate the things so much because I understand them. I know how stupid they are. Sure, they can be programmed to do complicated tasks, but it's all just a sham. Under the surface, they can't adapt. They break down all the time, and if they manage to run for more than five minutes, chances are that they will come up against a situation they aren't programmed for, and that will result in a malfunction. I don't know why people like them so much."

"Well, you have to admit that when they do work, they can make life easier for people." I needed to steer the conversation towards her old apprenticeship and away from her thoughts on clockworks. "But enough of that. I think we can agree that overall, clockworks are a bad thing. How did you wind up apprenticing to a clocksmith?"

"Ugh. It's a long story. To be succinct, my parents wanted me to, and I let them push me into it."

"How long were you there?"

"Not even a year. It didn't take long to figure out that the things are garbage. And my master was a complete fool. He thought clockworks were the best things ever. He couldn't see that they were junk. He thought my problems were a lack of talent. What a jerk."

"Sounds like it. Who was it?"

"Master Hodgewinkle." She spat out the name and followed it with a hiss.

"Wait. Not Fudnottin Hodgewinkle?"

"Yeah, that's his name. Why? Do you know him?"

"Not really, but I heard he recently died. Killed by the clockwork that he was building." I stared through her eyes into her soul as I delivered the news. Would she betray her guilt? Was she the one?

"What? Hodgey is dead?"

The news shocked her. Only a few races can control their involuntary reactions, and gnomes aren't one of them. Her pupils dilated and her eyelids fluttered open wider for the briefest of instants. Her body leaned in as she asked. If she was lying, she would have subconsciously tried to put distance or a barrier between us.

"That's what I hear," I said.

"Damnit, no! I was so close!"

"Close? To what?"

"To perfecting my golems and showing the world how much better they are than his clockworks. I would have put him out of business within a year. And now I'll never get to see the look on his face when he finds out that I beat him at his own game!" She threw up her arms and cursed at the ceiling. It was a horrible sight to see, like a bull walrus barking to scare off a rival. I took a few steps back. When she calmed down, she continued. "Of all the bad luck and stupid accidents. Why now?"

"Why do you say accident? Maybe the thing killed him."

"Hodgey? No way. He was too careful. No one could have reprogrammed his machines to kill, not without him finding out. I'm sure the thing malfunctioned and he got caught in the way. It figures, doesn't it? A malfunctioning clockwork would be the reason I won't get the chance to gloat over my old master."

I nodded and agreed with her. No point in trying to convince her otherwise. Either she was lying and was the greatest actress in the city, or she was telling me the truth.

Either way, Egna Worthcastle was a dead end.

I'd hoped that Egna was the culprit and that at this moment I would be driving home after sending Investigator Tillman and his men to apprehend her for Fud's murder. Instead, I let Lumo drive the cart while I thought about life. Fud's death was the first blemish on my otherwise wonderful retirement from the adventures of my youth. If I had been able to quickly resolve the issue, I would be able to get back to enjoying the luxury of running a business in a big city where opportunities sprinkled the landscape like rain.

Low risk and high profit. That's what I liked nowadays. Adventures were for kids. I needed to find out what happened and set things right soon, before my world fell out of balance.

That was when I found the note impaled on my front door with a bloody knife.

#

My door wasn't the only one with a note. There were a few more scattered around the neighborhood, although mine seemed to be the only one with a bloody knife. I guess the perpetrators were cheap bastards. It wasn't even a good knife. I tossed it in a clean beaker and sealed it up in case I wanted to check it out later, then read the note again.

"The clockwork maker was first. You might be next if you keep up with your work."

Did they want me to fall behind on my orders? Maybe they meant if I "continue with my work." But poor grammar aside, the note stood out from the rest of the hate mail I usually got. They were always very general, while this one was very specific about Fudnottin. Whoever wrote the note must have had something to do with his death, or at least known about it.

I looked out from the front doorway with more caution than usual and my suspicions were confirmed; the notes were only on doors of alchemists whom I knew to be in the hydraulic fluid business. Curious. But what did it mean? I added that to my list of clues and was relieved by the thought that the note meant Nerni was off the hook. She couldn't have gone around and placed all the notes. Although why did the note writer single me out for the bloody knife treatment? And whose blood was it? Could it have been Fudnottin's?

"Lumo, I don't like the look of this knife."

"Do you think it's part of whatever happened to Fud? Maybe I should go and keep an eye on Nerni and Melda again."

"Good idea, but don't let them know that's why you're there. I don't want them to get overly distraught. Nerni has enough emotional trauma to deal with."

"Gotcha, Boss. I'll tell them I came over to help clean up and help around the house so she wouldn't have to."

With Nerni in good hands, I didn't have to worry about her, but I had plenty of other issues on my mind. Too many, in fact. I couldn't concentrate on any one for long enough to come to a conclusion. I needed to clear my head, and aside from a good cream stout, the best way to do that was through alchemy.

No, I'm not talking about drinking one of my potions. I mean making potions. I learned the art from my mother, who is quite an accomplished alchemist back home, and I had been doing it since I was a child. I don't remember my first experiment, though my parents love to tell the story of how the workshop burned to the ground. Most of the potions and fluids I created these days were the old standards. I could make them in my sleep, which meant I could easily use the alchemical process as a way to clear my mind.

Now, what were we making for Magus Seebert . . . oh yes, Wisp Extract. Lumo appeared to have finished three bottles, which meant I only had to make three more. Since I was creating extracts anyway, I thought it wise to make a fresh batch of pepper beetle extract. I found enough empty bottles and laid them out on the workbench. I kept my lab nice and ordered since alchemy was a messy business. Strange accidents can happen if you let too many chemicals and other assorted ingredients interact, so sloppy alchemists tended to die young or get out of the business. I allowed nothing on the workbench except the ingredients for the current experiment, and as soon as I was done, I cleaned everything up and wiped down the bench. Lumo had a tendency to leave everything around on his bench and pile new experiments on top of old. That habit was a hard one to break, but I had managed to convert him over to my way of thinking with horror stories of experiments gone wrong. Oh, and I made sure to assign him tasks that would ensure flashy, if not dangerous, consequences when he failed to clean.

Our workbenches rested on the stone floor in the center of the room, which was completed by rock walls covered in sturdy shelves that held our commonly used ingredients. Bottles and boxes of every imaginary size and shape filled the shelves. They were cataloged first by type--you really don't want your caustics near your volatiles--and then alphabetically. Across the hall, the stockroom held even more ingredients.

Alchemy requires quite a lot of herbal knowledge, and I made trips once a month or so to the countryside to get what I needed. I sometimes bought from the local herbalists, but their supplies were never of the quality that I demanded. Still, they were adequate if I needed something quick. Going out and hunting down the proper plants and animals, and preparing the samples by drying, curing, homogenizing, straining and any number of other methods took a lot of time. Lumo was actually quite good at the gathering part, so lately I'd been letting him do most of that dirty work. He seemed to enjoy it too. Go figure. I guess he still had some of that old goblin tribal spirit in him.

At the moment, the prep area in the stockroom was filled with hanging flowers, drying out and leaving a wonderful scent in the place. If I could find the right kind of woman, it would be a great place to bring a date. Most of the women I've met weren't so into alchemical stockrooms, though, so I haven't had a chance to try it out on anyone yet.

I found the other ingredients I'd need and placed them on my workbench next to the bottles. It had been a while since I'd made Wisp Extract, so I had to cheat and consult my recipe book. The basic ingredients were the same for all extracts: Powder of Algoth for extracting the essential essence of the primary ingredient,

Fulminating Silver as a catalyst, and those two mixed into Thion Hudor, more commonly known as "Divine Water" or "Bile of the Serpent," which serves as an activating agent. I mixed the proper amounts of each ingredient into the bottles and quickly stoppered them. They would produce some noxious fumes, and one of the drawbacks to the city ordinance regarding allowed locations for alchemical labs was that basements didn't offer much in the way of ventilation. Once I added the last reagent, I took the bottles and hurried across the hall to the wisp cage in the stockroom.

Wisps are odd creatures. Some folks believe they are sentient, but others, like me, have observed their behavior and found that anything resembling sentience is just an artifact of their inherent randomness and hive-like traits. Bottom line: they are more closely related to bees than pixies, so I don't feel bad about killing them to make extract. Although given my past experiences with pixies, I could think of a few of them that I wouldn't mind turning into extract.

The wisp cage was really more of a glass box, since the slippery little buggers could get out through the tiniest of openings. I'd built the cage with an outer section that was sealed off from the room but which had gloves built into the side walls. If you can picture it, you stand in front of this glass box, with a partition creating front and back chambers. The whole thing is about the size of a crate of wine. Your hands go in gloves on either side of the box, with the extract bottles inside the front chamber. Then, using your gloved hands, you open an inner sliding glass door to release the wisps from the back chamber. The fun starts when you have to unstopper a bottle and catch a wisp inside. They glow an even brighter blue when they are agitated, so you wind up with this flashing light show, which only makes it harder to chase them into the bottles. I've gotten pretty good at it over the years, but I always make Lumo do it, both for his practice and my entertainment.

When I got the wisp cage out to start bottling, I swore--there were only three left. I'd purchased some recently, so we should have had a dozen or so.

"Damn it, Lumo, what did you do, let them all out?"

Well, I couldn't let myself get distracted by that. There wasn't much chance that I'd mess up one of the potions, so I only needed three. I'd have to send Lumo out to buy more when we had time. I hated to be out of stock. It made me nervous.

I bottled up the last of the wisps and let them get used to their new, albeit temporary homes. With the last bottle, I had to dig around in the stockroom to find some dried pepper beetle glands. I tossed in the required five glands plus one extra for good measure. I wore gloves, of course; the glands won't shock you like a wisp will, but you don't want to get concentrated pepper beetle gland juice on you, believe me.

I brought the bottles back to the workbench and gave each one a good shake to start the final reaction then set my timers. While I waited for them to incubate, I cleaned up the ingredients that were already out and brought out the Slacked Lime to quench the reaction when it was done. Quenching at the proper time is critical since you don't want the reaction to go too long and kill the potency of the extract. On the other hand, you don't want to quench too early or else your extract won't have time to build up to maximum potency. Through lots of trial and error, I've found the

optimal time for my favorite extracts. You can judge the quality of alchemists by the quality of their timers. I also brought out the Philosophers' Wool to stabilize the extracts and give them that nice white tint that everyone expects from Wisp Extract.

While I waited, I tidied up the shelves. Lumo wasn't as careful as I was about cleaning up residues, so I always had lots of wiping to do. It was a pretty mindless task, as busywork goes, so it gave me a chance to think things through. The first priority was to deal with the note on my door. I take specific death threats seriously, and I hoped Investigator Tillman was back and could take care of it. If not, I could always go to Braenoic for help.

It had been three years since we'd spoken. When she was a mercenary, she had been a lot of fun to hang out with, but once she found religion and joined the Spiritual Collective, it was difficult to see her. My friends say seeing her now is hard because I was actually in love with her for all those years and never did anything about it, and now it is too late since she's with the Collective. I think they're all nuts--sure, I was infatuated with Braenoic at first, but we moved beyond that, like any good adventuring partners. Besides, I think it's just because she started getting all preachy and wasn't fun anymore. In any case, we were still friends. We didn't have a falling out or anything like that, but just sort of drifted apart. I had heard through the grapevine that she was a Collective Paladin now, so she might have contacts and information that the Watchmen didn't.

That was a good plan: if Investigator Tillman couldn't fix things up, then I'd go see Braenoic. I mean, my life was now in jeopardy according to the note, right? What could it hurt to see her again?

When the timers went off, I added the remaining ingredients and swirled them into solution one bottle at a time. I ran a little production line that was actually kind of fun. I had the four bottles lined up before me and went down the row unstoppering, adding an ingredient, swirling, moving to the next one, and so on, then repeating the process. There is just something about the beauty of watching the materials mix together. I suppose it is magical in a way, but even if it wasn't, it would still feel magical to watch the granular ingredients slowly disappear into the swirling liquids. I especially enjoyed the Wisp Extract with its faint blue glow. Once the Philosophers' Wool, which wasn't really wool, but rather a fine mesh of fibrous crystals, dissolved in all four bottles, I stoppered them. I sealed the stoppers with my signature gold wax--a special creation that had been in the Terpin family for generations. The pepper beetle extract went to the stockroom, and the three bottles of Wisp Extract went with the three existing bottles in a crate on Lumo's workbench.

I was almost ready to make the delivery and attend Magus Seebert's party. Unresolved murders and bloody knives don't put me in a partying mood, but I couldn't risk offending Seebert. And I did need some new customers.

I packed up the Wisp Extracts in a nice wooden box. Some of my higher-end customers appreciated that sort of thing, and who was I to argue against value-added packaging that had a nice markup?

Once I'd finished the dirty work, I hauled myself upstairs to get dressed. I felt in the mood for my sky blue shirt. It was made from supple leather--basilisk according to the salesman--and it felt almost as soft as silk. That shirt didn't need a tunic, but I decided to let it hang low and belt over it, instead of tucking it in. The light gray trousers complemented the shirt and wouldn't fight with the heavy brown cloak I knew I was going to need for the evening. A Magus Seebert party meant lots of standing around, so I went with my low boots since they don't rub my ankles as much as the taller ones, which tend to be stiffer. Once I was suitably attired, I was ready to grace the world of magi society with my presence.

The box was small enough to carry by hand, so I left the cart at home and rode Shira to Magus Seebert's. After pulling the cart so much lately, my pony acted ten years younger and pranced the whole way to the Arcane Quarter. I needed to take her out more for fun rides.

Most of the City Watch and accompanying crowd from the morning had dispersed, but two Watchmen remained. They huddled near a public stable a few hundred feet from their building of interest and glanced over their shoulders a lot. As I passed by, they approached the building, but before they got far, black clouds rolled in, and they retreated. The ground near the weather mage's building was damp, so I assumed that wasn't the Watchmen's first attempt.

Fortunately I managed to avoid the trouble and reach my destination dry and unharmed--fancy box in hand--and put the elaborate door knocker to use. Magus Seebert was home and happy to see me. Pixies still flitted about taking care of the last-minute party preparations. All in all, Seebert seemed much more relaxed than earlier in the day.

"Ahhh, Alchemist Terpin, come in, come in. Everything is ready for tonight, so we can have that dialog we had to pass on this morning." He stuck his head out and eyed the gathered clouds. "Don't tarry out there. It looks like rain, and we don't want to get my lovely box of Wisp Extract wet now, do we?"

"Not at all, Magus Seebert. And I dare say the rain appears to be the handiwork of one of your compatriots."

"Indeed. Quite a good show those weather magi put on, don't you think?" He took the box of Extract and led me to his office.

Magus Seebert liked to talk, and he might know something if a fellow mage was involved; perhaps I could get him to share his information. We sat in his office and spoke over mugs of tea.

"If rumor has it, she is putting the show on for the City Watch. Something to do with the factory that blew up over in the Techno-Industrial Zone."

"Yes, nasty business, that. Some of my brethren are a trifle overzealous when it comes to dealing with people outside the Quarter, you know. I can understand why they don't welcome the rise of technology, what with the loss of business and so forth, but I welcome it. More time to devote to my research, I say."

"Ah, and do you know the mage who destroyed the factory?"

"Well, at the last Arcane Association meeting, Magus Justine complained about losing a production contract to some gnomes. I believe it involved some widget for predicting the weather."

"So she didn't have anything against the clockwork makers?"

"Nothing specific, to my knowledge anyway. But you know how most magi feel about them."

"Do you know any magi who might have taken it upon themselves to animate a clockwork and use it against its owner?"

"My dear Alchemist Terpin, are you, as the delightful saying goes, 'pumping' me for information?"

"You are ever the sly fox, Magus Seebert. You see, a clockwork that my friend was working on killed him the other night, and the data suggests that magic was involved. After the factory explosion, I have to wonder if a mage had a finger in the affair."

"I haven't heard of anyone doing such a thing, and I can assure you that the Association would deal a most harsh punishment to any mage who might have done so. Besides, a mage would be more likely to take the showy approach and tell everyone what he did. We like to be intimidating, you see."

"Would you be so kind as to inquire? Perhaps someone else knows if a mage perpetrated the deed."

"Ah, a request."

Uh-oh. The information would cost me. Magi are notorious for making every personal matter into a deal.

"Indeed. And I would be in your debt for your assistance."

"I see. A personal favor from you in the future in return for a personal favor from me right now."

I clenched my jaw in order to maintain my smile. I didn't like the way he said "personal favor." It sounded like trouble. But what else could I do? I couldn't very well investigate the magi on my own, and they didn't appear to comply with the City Watch these days.

"As you say. A personal favor."

He stood and extended his hand. When we shook, I felt a tingle of power binding the deal. I hoped it wouldn't come back to bite me in the butt. I told him the details about Fud's murder so he could get started.

"Very well. I will investigate any mage involvement with your friend's death. Now, we should leave this stuffy office and help ourselves to a drink in the parlor. The other guests should be arriving any moment now."

From a business standpoint, the party went well. Seebert introduced me to several potential customers, and he spoke highly of my work. I made three appointments to meet with magi later.

From a personal standpoint, the party was torture. I couldn't snub Seebert by leaving early, especially not while he put his own reputation on the line to give me a professional endorsement. All the while during my conversations, however, I worried about Nerni and, I suppose, Melda.

During the social hour, I made my first attempt to escape, but Seebert appeared by the exit and guided me towards a group engaged in a conversation about the conservation of energy during material transmutations. Torture.

I finally managed to get away between dinner and dessert. Seebert accosted me as I gathered my cloak and cane, but I told him that I needed to help the recent widow. He understood, but left me feeling guilty for skipping out when he so many more colleagues to introduce.

#

Admittedly, conversations at the party had been interesting and good for business, but it was difficult to enjoy myself when I knew that Nerni still suffered from Fud's death. The last thing I needed was a guilt trip for leaving the party from Seebert when I already felt guilty for going to the party in the first place.

Actually, the last thing I needed was more of the pleasure of Nerni's mother's company. Old Melda wasn't a ray of sunshine, that was for sure, but life left me no choice.

When I stepped onto the street, the night chill crept into my clothes. I wrapped myself tighter in my cloak to retain the last remaining vestige of the party's warmth and made my way to the Tiz once again. I had to speak to Nerni and find out more.

With the night's arrival, the city took on a different character. Cart-based vendors closed up and trundled on home, and indeed, most shops closed down as well. The entertainment industry, however, was just about to begin its workday. Some inns were open all day, serving breakfast and lunch to weary travelers and bachelors like myself. Others were more taverns than inns and only served food in the evening. Also alcohol, lots of alcohol. Beer was my drink of choice, but I could enjoy a good wine when it passed in front of me. I wasn't, however, a big fan of the exotic liquors. Chalk it up to my alchemical training, but I just couldn't drink anything that had been distilled. It made me think of experiments and potions, and those weren't the kinds of things any reasonable person would drink for pleasure.

Well, certainly there were less scrupulous alchemists out there who would make hallucination-inducing potions for a steep price, but I wasn't one of them. Those potions were illegal in most countries, and the punishment for making and selling them--death--carried a bit too much risk for my tastes. The folks who made those potions usually got rich fast and died young. The people who used the potions were generally the sorts who were already spiraling downward into the abyss, so the potions just hurried the journey. Without a potion to take their pain away, they might actually deal with it and get on with their lives, but with it, well, let's just say that there wasn't a whole lot of repeat business.

The smells of the city changed at night, too, especially at this time of year. Smoke from wood fires breathed into the darkness from chimneys everywhere and settled in the streets. As the land cooled, the onshore breeze died down, trapping the smoke. Much later in the night, an onshore breeze would bring the standard marine fog layer to replace the smoke, but it usually stayed higher than street level and burned off by mid-morning.

I reached Nerni's place--odd that I should be calling it that now, but my years of losing companions to death most foul taught me to cope and move on. I'd been accused of being a cold bastard before, but it had never really dawned on me why, until now. I stopped outside and stood there in the lamplight, shivering from a cold that didn't come from the moist night air. The weight of Fudnottin's death pressed in on me like a gelatinous cube, and once the overwhelming loss of a friend sunk in, the memories of all the other friends I'd lost joined in the fun. I staggered against the lamppost and dropped my cane. The world seemed to move in slow motion, and the street stretched away from me as if I were falling into a well. The sounds of the city damped out and became muffled.

What had happened to me? How had I become so isolated? Had I avoided the pain of losing friends for so long that I subconsciously pushed my friends away and avoided making new ones?

There are times in life when you have a staggering revelation. This was one of them. That one thought changed the way I looked at my whole life. It was as if I looked at someone else's life, as if all of a sudden I realized that I wasn't the person I always thought I was. That scared the pants off me. Well, not literally, of course; that would have been illegal in this district. I'd have to go to the south side of the river for that.

Humor. Good. It helped me focus and shut away the awful thoughts. I shook my head to clear away the confusion, then picked up my cane and climbed up the stairs to Nerni's place. I couldn't afford any self-doubt right now, not if I wanted to help Nerni. But one thing was sure: I would go visit Braenoic tomorrow whether I needed to or not and renew our friendship.

The way Nerni's door hung at a skewed angle by a single hinge warned me that everything wasn't right. I hadn't noticed it from the street, thanks to a tree that blocked the lamplight, but now that I did, I rushed in and yelled.

"Nerni! Melda! Lumo! Where are you?"

Silence.

Cane at the ready, I searched. Tables were out of place and chairs lay on the floor, along with other non-floor-dwelling items. There had clearly been a fight, but there wasn't any blood, which is always good as far as signs go, but there were no bodies either, which I guess could go either way.

Upstairs in the bedroom, I finally found a body. It was poor Lumo.

I rushed to him expecting the worst, and at first he didn't seem to be breathing. A quick inspection showed that he was, but just barely. He had been beaten, and his body was covered in dark green bruises, but the only blood came from his nose and mouth. I hoped there was no internal bleeding but had no real way of knowing. I designed my healing potions for cuts and other gaping wounds, but they were all I had with me, so I put them to use. First I used up my three vials of Regrowth Serum. I poured a little stream of the white liquid into each nostril and watched it fizz when it hit the blood. That would seal the wounds to stop any bleeding and prevent infection, but he needed more. I poured the last vial into his mouth and again watched. The potion bubbled and evaporated quickly, so he

wouldn't choke, but it also wouldn't reach very far down inside. I would need to get my serious healing potions from home to be of more help.

The problem was that I didn't want to leave Lumo here, and I had no way of bringing him back with me. The trauma he had suffered was the sort that meant you had to keep the victim comfortable. A jostling trip in a cart down the cobblestone streets might kill him. But then, so might spending the night in a building with a rogue clockwork, or whatever it was. I was too small to lift him onto the bed without risking more damage. I made him as comfortable as I could without moving him too much and placed a warm blanket over him.

I hadn't raced in years. I don't mean a dash across the street to avoid the rain--I mean the kind of racing where someone's life depends on your speed. Usually it had been me running from some foul nasty hell-bent on eating me or doing something equally unpleasant. Now I was running and riding to save Lumo's life, and my legs and Shira both remembered what to do. I reached my place so quickly that I amazed myself, but as soon as I stopped to go inside and search the basement for better healing potions, my out-of-shape muscles told me that there would be a price for the speed.

I found a few Sleep-Be-Gone anti-fatigue potions while I searched, so I quaffed one to shut up my muscles and stored the others in my belt just in case. I found some replacement Regrowth Serum vials, but I couldn't find the really potent stuff, the Elixir of Life. I searched everywhere--twice--but still no luck. Thinking back, I tried to remember when I'd last made a batch. Could it have been so long? Could I have run out and not replaced them? That didn't seem like me, but I didn't get many orders for it. Maybe I'd decided to make it as needed. Unfortunately I hadn't thought about emergencies since "needing" now meant for an order, not to save someone's life. Times had certainly changed for this gnome.

Braenoic. She was Lumo's only hope now. The Knights of the Spiritual Collective had the power to heal battle injuries, didn't they? There was only one way to find out and that was to go find her.

The Sleep-Be-Gone had done its thing, so I was out the door running once again. Braenoic lived in the Spiritual Collective compound south of the river and closer to the sea. The main Collective compound mirrored the old royal castle on the north side of the river. I guess they wanted to make a statement about the duality of rule by the secular and religious powers, but the truth was that the Collective had no direct power over anything other than its congregation. However, it had an enormous congregation who followed its every command like sheep, so the Collective could exert enormous pressure when it wanted.

My adrenaline-fueled dash came to an abrupt stop when I reached the river. What was I thinking? I had a pony. Damn chemicals clouding my mind. Racing back, I hopped on Shira, and we took off at a gallop. I hadn't taken her for a serious ride in ages--what had happened to me? This little adventure brought back all my old memories and habits that had managed to slip away over the years. I mourned Fudnottin's death, but in an odd way, I felt great. It was as if I'd been in a haze all this time, and at long last I'd broken through. I only hoped my skills weren't so rusty that I would let my friends down.

Racing along the boardwalk toward the bridge, I spotted my old friends from the afternoon. The elves had moved down toward the ocean and appeared to be heading for the bridge as well. Probably going to the south side to prey on tourists and customers of the seedier establishments found there. I spotted the one whose eyes I had burned, so when I passed, I yelled out to him in elfish.

"Omg! Lamer!"

I couldn't see his reaction, but I did hear him yell back at me "*Stfu, biznatch!*"

God, I hate elves.

Out of the night loomed the bridge: a bulky stone construction from a different age, an age of strife when invading armies regularly strode its length and imposing masonry was all the rage. A stone fortress enclosed most of the bridge with a raised portcullis at each end--in the old days attacks would have come from the south just as often as from the north. Tonight, torches lined the walls peering through the evening smoke and fog and they flickered in the wind as we passed.

On the far side of the bridge, I took a quick right turn and continued to ride along the river, this time on the south bank. Over here the crowds were thinner and less rowdy, since the bars and revelers tended to stay well away from the Spiritual Collective compound. The closer I got, the more the scenery changed. Here the faithful lived as close to the compound as they could, so shops were almost non-existent--well, except for those that sold religious paraphernalia. Since the Collective owned most of those places, they were allowed to operate. The shops the Collective didn't own never seemed to last very long. Either the Collective muscled them out of business, or else it was worse; you could never tell with religious enterprises.

I had to leave Shira in the stables outside the compound. They didn't like non-Collective officials bringing mounts inside, but because of all the pilgrims and tourists, there were plenty of places to leave her for the time being. I told the gatekeepers that I was a pilgrim looking to say my evening prayers and they let me enter without an escort. No one would risk stealing from the Collective, so security wasn't very tight. Back in the old days, I might have considered it--I did like a bit of risk--but not now. Once inside, I found myself standing in a cobblestone courtyard the size of a small lake. The stones were different colors, and as I crossed, I realized that the courtyard was a giant mosaic depicting the gods of the various faiths that made up the Spiritual Collective's Pantheon. I didn't know my way around, so I had to stop a young acolyte and ask for directions to the barracks. I got a funny look, but she talked easily enough. If I was there to cause trouble, why would I start with the barracks?

Before long, I found myself standing outside a plain-looking wooden door. The building was dark stone, slate perhaps, with an almost bluish tint. I wasn't delaying. It was just that these old Collective buildings had very interesting architecture. Yeah, right. With a deep breath, I knocked.

The door opened and I was transported back in time.

Braenoic still had those deep brown eyes that froze the universe when they caught you. I don't know how long we stood there staring at each other. Well, at least I was staring. I admit it. Her scar had softened, so she looked like she had a tired smile instead of a wry smirk. Somewhere along the way in the past three years, she had shaved her stubble so her face was as smooth as the top of my head and chopped her hair short. Really short, as in so short it didn't bother laying down flat on her head--it just didn't look right. Even looking at her, I couldn't picture her without the long ponytail. I did notice that she still wore the same cobalt and hematite brooch. I was glad that some things had stayed the same.

When she spoke, I didn't hear her. I was having an out-of-body experience, but she spoke again and took my arm to bring me back.

"I said, 'it's so great to see you, Zook!' I can't believe you're here! Why are you here?" At the last part, she cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow. Good old Braenoic, always suspicious. I'm sure she was a great asset to the Spiritual Collective.

"Braenoic! It's been too long!" I tried to act all nonchalant, which was stupid since I'd come to find her, and then stood there like an idiot. She always brought that awkward side out in me, even though there'd never been anything romantic between us. Really. Great adventuring partners don't mess up the team by getting involved with each other. That's an old rule. We'd gotten past that initial window of opportunity without risk of romance, and after that, we were such close friends that it never came up. I'd be lying if I said it never crossed my mind, but after getting to know her so well, I figured we worked great as friends but probably wouldn't as lovers, so I let it go. Or tried to, at least. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly, come in. Come in. I have some tea brewing." She brought me into her outer room where she had her desk and a couch. We sat, and she poured us tea in glazed pottery mugs that had seen a rough life judging by the cracks and chips.

"The mugs certainly seem like you, but tea? What happened to black coffee strong enough to raise the dead?"

She laughed. I wish I could say it was like fairy bells in the spring winds, but it wasn't. It was more like pigs rutting for mushrooms, but still, it touched a long-buried part of my soul.

"I guess I've changed. The Spiritual Collective encourages regular prayer, which helps calm me. The coffee fit more with the old me, so I gave it up and switched to tea. But how about you? Are you still the same old Zook?"

"Well, I've gotten a little more worn around the edges, I suppose. This city life has made me go soft." I knew I had come here for something, but what was it? Oh, yeah. I jumped up from the couch and smacked myself in the head.

"What is it, Zook?"

"Seeing you threw me for a bit of a loop, but I'm in a hurry, and I need your help. My apprentice got beat up pretty badly. I stabilized him as best I could, but he needs more healing than I can manage. Can you help him?"

"Of course, let's go!" She mumbled as she grabbed her things. I thought she was still talking to me, but when I listened, I realized she was saying a prayer of preservation. She threw on a crimson and white Collective tunic and cinched it in place with her sword belt. Over it all she wore a black cloak with her family brooch clasping it together. The shiny gray of the hematite and vivid blue of the lapis lazuli looked good against the black cloak--I'd have to remember the color combination. "My pony is in the stables, did you ride?" I told her I had. "Go to the front gate and retrieve your pony. I'll meet you there."

We ran out of the building and parted ways. It didn't take me long to retrieve Shira, but by the time I was ready, Braenoic stood waiting on an iridescent white pony. The beast practically glowed in the torch light, which made her look very Paladin-like.

"Lead on, Zook."

"Right. This way."

Galloping through the night fog was just like old times. And just like old times, she brought her steed up next to mine and urged me faster. We raced again, as if we'd been doing it every day, but she let me lead the way. It felt great to be out with her again, but Lumo's condition put a damper on my spirits. I felt guilty for having forgotten him, even if it was only for a moment.

We arrived back at Nerni's place in record time and hitched the ponies out front before running inside.

"Is this your place? Not bad, but it doesn't seem your style."

"Oh, no, this is a friend's place. Lumo was guarding them."

"Were they hurt, too?"

"They weren't here when I arrived. Just Lumo, and he was in such bad shape, I rushed out to get help. Once he's stable, we'll have to go find them."

"We?" She shot me a quick raised eyebrow as we mounted the stairs.

"Who else would I have at my side for an adventure?"

"Just like old times, rushing into danger with Zook." I think she was smiling, but I was busy leading the way into the bedroom.

Lumo still lay on the ground, but there was no new blood. He seemed to be breathing. That was a good sign.

"This is Lumo?" I nodded. "Zook, what happened to you? Consorting with goblins now?"

"Hey, they aren't a bad sort once you get to know them. I regret having killed so many, but he told me that those tribes were always a bit nasty, so maybe it wasn't too bad what we did back then."

"Well, for you, I'll help him. Stand back and give me some room."

She knelt next to his broken body and laid her right hand on his chest. She lowered her head in prayer and grasped her forehead in her left hand. As I watched, Lumo's limbs shifted back into their proper positions, and his skin darkened to a healthy green. Next, his breathing deepened and became steadier. Finally his body appeared to relax, and he began to snore.

Braenoic slumped to the ground beside him.

I rushed over, but she didn't need my help. She must have used up her energy helping Lumo, because now she slept too. Now that Lumo was healed, I maneuvered him onto the bed and then did the same for Braenoic. She was still a solid woman, her small frame hiding a hefty set of muscles, but I managed to get her in a comfortable position without waking her. I hoped she wouldn't mind sharing the bed with the goblin, but sleeping on the floor would have left her surly.

Now that Lumo rested, out of danger, I could search for clues that would help me locate Nerni--and I suppose her mother, too.

The workroom was just as I'd last seen it, minus Fudnottin's body. I guessed the Watchmen had removed it for sanitation purposes. I hoped they hadn't left the gruesome task for Nerni to take care of. The struggle had messed up the rest of the house, but I didn't find any clues. I'd have to wait until Lumo awoke to get answers. In the meantime, I made some tea. I figured that Braenoic would probably like some when she got up.

I was right. It hadn't taken her long to wake up, and she wasn't thrilled about being in bed with a goblin, the fact that he lay comatose notwithstanding. Life in the Spiritual Collective must not have helped her get rid of the old prejudices.

I wanted to run out into the night to chase after Nerni, but which way would I go? I needed a direction and I needed Brae's help to find it. She needed time to recover her strength, so we sat down over a couple of mugs of the tea, and I waited patiently. It was tough.

"I can't thank you enough, Brae." Not only had she switched to tea, but now she milked it up and added honey. Isn't that one of the signs of the apocalypse? "How did you do it? I didn't know you had any divine powers. I figured you would know some tricks or bring him to a priest or something."

"When I joined the Spiritual Collective, they saw my skill with the sword and decided that I shouldn't waste my talent. The Order of Paladins took me in and taught me their methods of fighting. It's a very different style than I had back as a mercenary, but it's quite effective."

"But you can't teach someone divine power. Arcane, yes, but not divine."

"True enough. As I progressed, there were ceremonies. Some were pretty ordinary, but others had a hint of magic. I'll never forget the first moment the gods touched me. There I was, knelt in prayer overnight in the ruins of an old temple somewhere out in the Badlands. I had walked the whole way and fasted for three days."

"Heh, I've had visions after days like that."

"No, no, don't laugh. It wasn't a vision. As I knelt praying for guidance--that was the purpose of the ceremony, you see, to get guidance along your path in the Spiritual Collective--anyway, as I knelt, my leg began to twitch. It wasn't much at first, but soon my whole left leg twitched uncontrollably. It got so bad that I had to lie down to stretch out my leg. I felt their touch, Zook! The gods were real! I know, twitching isn't very spectacular, but as I lay there on the rock-strewn grass, leg twitching away, I stared up at the stars. A voice spoke in my head, and when it spoke to me, the world disappeared. I was in a void, black and silent, as if I were floating in a dark sea at night with nothing to touch or smell or taste."

"It still sounds like nights I've had after drinking too much gypsy wine."

"Listen, baldy, I'm serious. Don't belittle my experience. Where was I? Oh right, there I was in the void with this booming voice speaking to me. It told me that I was worthy to serve, that all my past transgressions were forgiven. It told me that I had a new purpose in life. My purpose was to defend the helpless. It was to be my penance for all those years of killing creatures weaker than me. The voice forgave me, but I saw my life clearly for the first time, and the weight of guilt from all those deaths swamped me. I was drowning in the void. The voice told me to have faith and let that faith be my guide. I didn't know what to do, but then as I wallowed in guilt, I felt my twitching leg. I focused on that twitch and it led me back to my body."

"An out-of-body experience, eh? Unique." She gave me a dirty look.

"Yes, it was. When I woke up, my body was freezing, as if I'd been lying there for hours. And I had. I figured it was all a dream, just like you believe, but then the dawn broke over the plains just as I sat up, and a ray of sunlight speared through a window in the ruins and struck me in the face. I was blinded for a moment, and while I was dazzled, the voice spoke to me again and told me to remember my faith. I wasn't dreaming that time for sure."

"That's a pretty wild story. I can't say that I necessarily believe it the way you do, but it sure sounds like something happened out there."

"What about you, Zook? What's changed in your life? Married, gaggle of little Zooklings?"

"Shouldn't we go do something for Lumo?"

"No, now he just needs to rest up."

"Well, can't we do anything to help him recover faster? We need to find out what happened to him and where Nerni and Melda, her evil mother, went."

"You're right. Wait, are you stalling?"

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. I remember your tricks, Zook. Now fess up. You aren't dragging me into something that will get me into trouble, are you? I'm a Paladin, so I can tell if you're lying. Have you been shacking up with some sweet young thing?"

"Nah, nothing like that, and isn't that a bit racy for a Paladin to be asking? There have been a few women, but nothing that lasted." We always seemed to talk about our love lives right away. Odd and a bit disturbing, given whose kitchen we were sitting in. "Mostly I've been building up the business. I sold off most of my loot from the old days and used it to buy a building and all the paraphernalia I needed to run an alchemy shop."

"And how's it going?"

"It was slow at first, but once I built up a few regular clients, the money became steady enough. I've had a few apprentices to torment as well. Lumo joined me recently."

"Stable businessman doesn't really sound like the Zook that I knew."

"Look who's talking, Ms. Paladin."

We sipped our tea and had one of those awkward moments we were famous for. What was she thinking? Did she ever think about us getting together? Not that it

would matter anymore since she was with the Collective now. I stared countless fathoms into her eyes and tried to find the answer, but couldn't.

"What about finding your friends?"

"Right. Here, take a look at this knife?"

"Are you going to give me any hints about it or am I on my own?"

"I don't want to bias your thoughts, so humor me."

I dug the jar out of my satchel and passed it to Braenoic. I'd left it behind when I ran off for help, and now I was glad to have something to distract us from our awkward silence. Or maybe it was just my own awkward silence.

Braenoic took the jar without saying a word and turned it over and over to see the knife from all angles. Then she glanced at me with a raised eyebrow.

"May I?" She motioned to unscrew the lid.

"Go ahead, I've already handled it."

She raised an eyebrow at me then removed the lid and set it on the table.

Then she reached inside and, with a delicate touch, removed the knife. Her face went slack as she made her examination, a total professional. I sat back with my tea while she worked until at last she put the knife back and secured the lid.

"So," I said, "what do you think?"

She thought for a moment and then replied.

"It's a piece of junk. Wouldn't survive a real fight, but it's made to look tough. Maybe a replica or souvenir. The blood is from an animal of some sort, or at least it isn't from a person."

"How do you know that?"

"I prayed for guidance. I can feel the pain associated with people suffering."

"

"But someone might have given it willingly--could you detect that?"

"If they did that, it would likely have the taint of the occult, which it doesn't."

"Hmm, you do have some new powers, don't you?"

"All the better for fighting evil. But back to the knife, I have no idea where it might have come from, but it does have a curious symbol engraved in the blade."

"Really? Let me see that." She took the knife out again and showed me.

Sure enough, there it was, on the side of the blade. Hardened blood filled the engraving, which is why I hadn't noticed it before. I couldn't quite make out the pattern with all the crust in the way, so I scraped the knife clean in the sink. A little water and the pointy end of a fork did the trick. Once clean, I knew immediately where the knife had come from: the Labor Guild. Braenoic watched and waited patiently--another new thing for her--so I explained the meaning of the hammer and cart symbol.

"They must have given the knife away as a retirement gift or award or something."

"Well, how did you end up with it all covered in blood?"

"It was stuck in the front door of my shop, holding up a death threat."

"Hold on there, Zook." Her eyes had a look that told me her mind raced to catch up to her ears. "Now you're sounding like the good old Zook we all knew and

loved." Loved? Eh? "Here I thought you were settled down and just had an accident with your apprentice, but clearly there is more going on. No more bullshit, Terpin, tell me everything."

Terpin, eh? That she called me by my last name meant she wasn't playing around anymore. I sat back down and told her the whole story, minus the bit about my past affair with Nerni. I did, however, make sure to mention how evil Nerni's mother was.

When it was all finished, she sat back and stared in disbelief.

"Wow, Zook. How do you manage to get involved in these messes? Well, don't worry, I'll be happy to bail you out again."

"Bail me out? Wait a minute, I asked for your help with saving Lumo's life, but I don't need to be bailed out." Bail me out, will she? "Besides, I seem to remember saving your butt on any number of occasions."

"So, what, you don't want my help now? Are you going to let your friends suffer because you're too proud to get help? Always trying to be the glory hound. Same old Zook."

This little reunion wasn't going the way I'd hoped. We'd had arguments before, but this seemed kind of extreme. Was I being a jackass?

"Look, Nerni, err, Braenoic," I shook my head to clear it, but it was too late to avoid her reaction. It was a mixture of pain and disgust. "I'm sorry. I'm a little stressed out and confused by all this, so please don't hold it against me." Silence. "I do want your help." More silence.

Do you ever get the feeling that you've just made a really bad mistake, but you don't know what it was? Me too. I was grasping, so I said, "Please, I need you. Won't you at least take a look at the workshop and clockwork? Your new powers might find something everyone else missed."

"Zook. Ugh." She sighed and shook her head. "Fine, I'll give you another chance." Another chance? Eh? Maybe she did have feelings for me after all. "I'll check out the workshop, but then I'm leaving."

I still wasn't sure what was going on, but I was glad she agreed to help. I took her to the workshop, but she stopped me at the door.

"Stay here. It's easier if I'm not distracted."

Hanging back at the doorway, I watched her pace the room. She clasped her hands together and bowed her head as she walked. She didn't seem to look at anything in particular, and she mumbled--prayers, I assumed.

She quickly honed in on the prototype clockwork. It stood silent as she approached and remained still when she slowly ran her hands over its surface. She didn't touch it, but she came awfully close, as if there was an invisible layer shielding it, preventing her hands from touching.

When her hands reached its hands, they twitched--the clockwork's hands, that is. We both jumped when it moved, though we may have overreacted a tad, since it only moved about an inch. Still, it shouldn't have moved at all. That was weird. Very weird.

"I thought you said this thing couldn't move!"

"Yeah, it shouldn't have been able to. What did you do?"

By this point I had walked in the room to take a closer look. Braenoic already had her eyes open, studying the prototype. The arms had risen and moved outward slightly, almost as if it had been reaching for Braenoic. Now, though, it lay still again, even with her standing nearby.

"I was sensing the room and felt an evil presence. Well, not so much a presence as a residue. It came from the clockwork." She turned to look at me. "It is purely mechanical, right? No magic?"

"That's right. Why? What are you getting at?" She was studying the prototype again with her divine powers.

"Well, now I'm sure of it. This machine was touched by an Outsider."

"An Outsider? Here in the city? That is definitely bad news. Who would be stupid enough to summon one of those demons?"

"There are many Outsider cults operating underground. One of our mandates is to stamp them out when we find them. Which means that if Outsiders are involved, then I have to be as well. I guess it will be like old times. Back together on an adventure with Zook--that's the last thing I would have expected when I got up this morning." Her voice seemed weary when she said that last part.

"Don't you want to be involved?"

With no expression on her face, Braenoic just stared at me for a few heartbeats.

"The jury is still out on that."

"Listen Zook, I need to report back to the Collective. Will you be okay until the morning?" I discovered that I didn't enjoy being left out of the loop.

"I've been doing this kind of thing for years, I'll be fine. In fact, I have a lead I want to track down."

"Oh, and what's that? The knife?"

"Yep. But don't worry about me, I'll let you know what I find out in the morning." If she was going to baby me, then I'd play my cards close to my chest for a while longer. I wasn't sure I liked the new Braenoic.

"Fine, then."

I did need her help, though. "Is it safe to move Lumo? I don't want to leave him here, especially if Outsiders are around." She said he would be fine in the cart and offered to help load and unload my gangly apprentice.

As we worked, I had a thought.

"Shouldn't we tell the Watchmen about the Outsiders?"

"I suppose we could as a courtesy, but it's my case now, and the Spiritual Collective doesn't answer to the City Watch in these matters."

"Still, their investigation so far might have something we can use.

Investigator Tillman seemed like a decent enough sort of fellow."

"Well, if you really want to, we can drop by in the morning and talk to him."

After a bit of wrangling, we got Lumo in the cart and the cart hooked to my pony. We rode in awkward silence and only spoke enough to coordinate getting Lumo to his bed.

"I see you're still wearing that moldy old potion belt. What happened to that nice one I got for you?"

"Oh, I have it upstairs. I save it for when I dress up." It wasn't going to work. I could tell. We stood in my front hall and she looked me over. Me and my basilisk-leather shirt and coordinated outfit.

"When do you ever not dress up?"

Yep. "You see, the leather is too stiff, I couldn't get it properly broken in. It chafes when I wear it too much."

Braenoic just gave me a look and then promised to return first thing in the morning. Then she rode off into the night.

I'd handled our reunion poorly, but I didn't think I was alone in that. As I got ready for my next outing, I wondered what had happened to us. But I was about to go into danger and I couldn't let my worries dull my thoughts.

I'd run into the Labor Guild before. They hated the clockwork makers, and they knew I prepared materials for them. I'd been harassed on several occasions, and much of the hate mail came from their members. At one point, I'd tracked down the composer of one particularly nasty letter. I didn't do anything about it then, but I'd wanted to know who it was just in case. Apparently this was the case I'd been preparing just in, uh, for.

I ate a quick meal to get my energy up and then gathered my gear. My belt, of course, fully stocked. My cane at hand. A pair of black leather gloves along with my black cloak to complete the outfit. I was ready for the night.

The chump in question was one Portnoy Rochester. I didn't know the face, but I knew he lived down by the wharf in the Greater Coldshore district, which teemed with Labor Guild members. Most people there didn't know my face, so I should be safe walking around, but I couldn't get careless.

I made my way down there on Shira but decided to secure her in a stable outside the district. Sticking to the shadows while trying to look like I wasn't trying to stick to the shadows wasn't easy, but I managed to get to the neighborhood pub near Portnoy's apartment without attracting too much attention. There weren't many gnomes in the Labor Guild, but there were many gnomish merchants running shops around here, so I wasn't too out of place. I passed Portnoy's place on the way, but it was dark, so I figured I'd catch him at the pub.

Inside, insufficient light struggled to make its way through air thick with smoke. A perfect place to spy. The weather-beaten wood covering the outside of the building looked even worse on the inside, if that was possible. I don't know exactly how the walls inside had deteriorated, unless the owner periodically flipped the place inside out. Years of pipe and cigar smoke stained the low beams overhead as well as the leathery-skinned workers who populated the room. The smells in the place overpowered my nose: sweat, smoke, cooking, brewing, and over it all, the salty sea air. I guessed that most of the patrons came straight from work at the docks to the pub without passing by a washtub or wardrobe.

The Labor Guild men were mostly humans, half-orcs, and other assorted big dumb apes. Portnoy was a human, or so I'd heard. I'd never actually seen the man, so I had to do a little investigating. I stuck out in this crowd, but I didn't want to draw attention, so I threw my hood back, sidled up to the bar, and shouted for a beer. I made a few disparaging remarks about the stuck-up women from the inland districts, burped, farted, and did all that other guy stuff that guys do to make the other guys realize that they are guys, too. After five minutes, no one looked at me sideways again.

Being a gnome, and thus a shorty, had its advantages. I scurried around underneath the attention of pretty much everyone in the pub. As I wandered and sipped my beer, I listened in on the conversations, waiting for someone to call Portnoy by name.

The only one who noticed me was the innkeeper. They have magical senses that let them see patrons who are nursing their drinks, and dirty looks that are accurate at twenty paces. After an hour, I started in on my third beer, which maybe wasn't such a good idea but was necessary to keep the innkeeper happy--or at least to keep him not unhappy.

I hadn't found Portnoy yet, but I overheard some talk about Fudnottin's death. Nothing so dramatic or easy as a braggart claiming responsibility, but I did discover that most people in the room shed no tears over the death of a clockwork inventor. No, they were happy enough to have one less of them in the world.

Not surprisingly, no one talked about Outsiders or any other occultish topics. Mostly they talked about women, beer, and work. In that order.

Finally, around when the drinkers started to disperse, I heard someone call Portnoy by name. Portnoy turned out to be a human after all, and ugly to boot. Other than his revolting face, which looked like someone had hit it with a board a few times while he was growing up, he was pretty ordinary: medium height, medium-length dark brown hair, scruffy beard, shabby clothes. I wouldn't have been able to pick him out of a crowd.

When he said his goodbyes, I slipped out and followed him into the street. It was pretty late, so not many people were out and about. That made it both hard and easy to follow him without being spotted. It was hard in that there was no way to hide in a non-existent crowd, but easy in that there were fewer eyes to notice you behaving suspiciously.

Fortunately he headed straight home; I didn't want to deal with waiting around even longer. Also, from my prior investigation, I knew he was single, so I didn't want to have to deal with any woman he might bring home after a hard day's work. No, our little talk would go down easier if it was just him and me.

Once he went inside, I settled onto a stone ledge overlooking the steps leading up to his second story apartment. The stone was as cold as the night and it sapped the heat from my body, but at least it provided a secluded perch that gave me a good view. The nice thing about his apartment was that it only had two ways in or out: the front door and the front window immediately adjacent to the front door. That made it easy for me to watch over him and make sure he didn't sneak away. I was fairly sure he hadn't seen me following him, but better safe than sorry. Also, I wanted him to go to sleep before I made my move.

Light peeked out from around his storm shutters for at least half an hour. The dampness of the fog that had replaced the chimney smoke worked with the night chill to sap my strength. Walking the streets had kept me warm, but now that I sat motionless, I had no defense. With cloak wrapped tight to both stave off the chill and blend with the shadows, I huddled as Portnoy enjoyed his warm apartment. Once the shivers started, I knew I had to take more drastic action. I'd planned on sitting in a perch like this one, so I'd brought a vial of Internal Heat. Its effects didn't last long, so I wanted to wait until it was absolutely necessary, but I couldn't pay attention while shivering, so the time was now.

Internal Heat is kind of oily as it goes down, but it doesn't taste as bad as you might expect. Our family had always been good with additives, so I always made my potions with flavorings to mask the chemical taste. Internal Heat has several exotic components, such as drake bile and fireweed distillate, and it is a challenge to get them to work effectively without being toxic, but I had managed to make a dozen or so of the precious vessels. Getting rid of the bitter taste was another level of difficulty, but when you are as good as I am, you have to do it with style, no matter the cost. The secret is cinnamon.

Of course, once I drank the potion, the lights went out Portnoy's apartment. Sigh.

I extracted myself from my perch and snuck to the window to listen.

Portnoy snored like a bugbear growls, so I hoped that meant he hibernated when he slept.

I'd picked a few locks back in the day, but I was by no means an expert thief. Mostly, we just bashed our way around during our adventures. I toyed with the idea of going in with a bang, but I didn't want to arouse the neighbors--especially not in a neighborhood full of Labor Guildies--so I went to work on the lock.

After a minute, it was clear that the lock was beyond my meager abilities. I'd learned the hard way to keep a backup lock-pick alternative.

Two weeks in an orc prison camp is an excellent teacher. I highly recommend it to anyone who wants their lessons to really sink in. Ever since then, I have kept a vial of basilisk acid in my belt, tightly stoppered and made of heavy glass. Leaking acid would be a Bad Thing. Fortunately, I hadn't had occasion to use it.

In the cover of darkness, I funneled the acid into the lock and waited for it to work its magic. I smelled the iron lock corroding and then the wood of the door burning as the acid seeped down. Five minutes, that should be plenty of time to let it eat away at the innards of the locking mechanism.

Heheh, I was giddy. Even after the elves, I still had pent-up aggression to work out, and I looked forward to my meeting with Mr. Rochester.

When at last the waiting was over, I dramatically swept my cane up to the door handle and gave a little shove. I have style, you see, and when breaking in to beat answers out of a Labor Guild thug, you have to act sophisticated. The door didn't budge. I pushed harder, but it did no good, so I put my back into it and gave a hearty push. Hmmm, this wasn't good. I tried to turn the knob and now it wouldn't rotate. I peered into the lock and realized my mistake. The acid had fused the whole mechanism. Damn. I guess I'd have to do it the hard way after all.

The front window was just off the front porch, but the banister was designed for human height, not gnome height. Also, the window was over a two-story drop to the unforgiving cobblestones of the street below. I would have to be careful if I was going to break in that way.

Pulling the shutters open revealed pane-glass windows. I held the hem of my cloak up to one of the panes to muffle the sound of breaking glass and then gave it a swift tap with my cane. The time for subtlety was long gone, so I quickly swept out the remaining shards and repeated the fun on three other panes. You know, there is something oddly satisfying about breaking glass, but I didn't have time to spare on more panes. As I dove from the banister through the broken window, I hoped Portnoy hadn't woken up.

The hard wooden floor rushed up and met my head. The thought that I should have rolled flashed in my mind as phantom lights flashed in my vision. The fall rattled my brain, but I managed to get up just in time to get a face full of boot.

I tumbled back and lost my cane in the darkness. As I struggled to my feet, I could feel the warm tickle of blood oozing down my forehead. At least it wasn't a flowing gash.

Portnoy, I assumed, lumbered over to me through the darkness. My only advantage was that gnomes have better night vision than humans, and the apartment was dark except for a patch of light from the street near the broken window. That was on the far side of the room, and the light silhouetted Portnoy in front of me.

I rolled, trying to be as quiet as possible to avoid his follow-up attack. He grunted as he threw a chair at the spot I'd just vacated. Good thing for me that he missed my move.

"Where are you? Come on out!"

He searched for me in the dark corner while I made my way around behind him. I didn't want to put myself between him and the light, but I didn't have much choice. I must have still been groggy from hitting the floor and his boot, because I stumbled and ran into an errant piece of furniture hiding in the dark. Tonight was not my night.

Portnoy turned at the sound and let out a ragged roar. He might have been drunk, or just the kind of person who wakes up on the wrong side of the bed every time he wakes up, but he stumbled worse than I had. A gnome fighting against a human is always at a disadvantage. Say what you want about technique, but you can't argue about an extra foot or two of reach.

If Portnoy managed to grab me, it would be all over. I wouldn't be much better off if it came down to trading blows. What is a poor little gnomish alchemist to do? I'll tell you: fight dirty.

As he rounded a table, I sidestepped out of the light and dove at his ankles. I rotated as I flew through the air and hit him in the shins with my back. I heard a moist popping sound as he pitched forward over me and crashed into a wall. If we didn't quiet down soon, the neighbors would be coming to see what the problem was.

I got up to see him thrashing around on the floor like a landed fish. He would be up soon, so I needed to press my advantage. I jumped up and arced over on top of him, which sounds more impressive than it looks. I landed with both feet planted firmly together right on his groin. It would have hurt a lot more if I were an orc, or at least a dwarf, but ya gotta work with what ya got.

It was enough.

I let him squirm and moan while I looked for matches. His place had been a mess even before I'd arrived, so it took a while to find his matches, but eventually I did. I wanted him to have some time to recover anyway, so it wasn't wasted. Once I lit some candles, I recovered my cane and went to have a little chat.

Now, bear in mind that this is the guy who once sent me a personal message saying he would kill me and feed my corpse to the crabs in the harbor if I continued to help the clockwork makers. Also bear in mind that he violently opposed any technology that might put him out of work, and he thought all gnomes were part of a conspiracy against honest, hard-working folks like himself. And finally, bear in mind that down in the bar, he had proclaimed to everyone in earshot that the world was better off with one less gnome and that he wished he could have been there to laugh while that gnome was torn apart by his bastard creation.

Bear all that in mind so that I don't look so bad for using his stomach to practice my swing with the cane. I was also a little annoyed at getting kicked in the face.

It didn't take long for him to surrender, and since I'm not evil, I stopped hitting him as soon as he did.

"Who are you, why are you here?"

"Don't you recognize me, Portnoy? You've left me enough death threats."

"What?"

"Playing dumb, eh? Well, maybe you recognize this knife." I thrust the knife at his face to watch him flinch. Okay, maybe I was a little evil, but my blood still raced through my veins.

He remained silent as he stared at the blade. I turned it slowly, like roasting a pig on a spit or evaporating a distillate over an alcohol burner. When I rotated the Labor Guild insignia into view, his eyes grew wide just long enough to betray his reaction.

"I swear, man, it wasn't me."

"Wasn't you, what?" If he wanted to tell me more than I knew, who was I to stop him?

"Those guys said we should take advantage of the clockwork thing."

"Take advantage? How?"

"They said we should post some notes and maybe get you guys scared."

"And you had nothing to do with it?"

He hesitated.

"No, no." Lies.

I swung my cane into my palm so he would get the point.

"Okay, okay, maybe I helped put the notes up, but I didn't have anything to do with the runt that got killed. I swear."

"So you just wanted to scare us and make us think you were involved. Is that it?"

"Yeah, man, yeah. Like that."

"So who was it who put you up to it?" I asked, nice and quiet like.

"Oh man, come on. I can't tell you names."

"You know, you might have internal bleeding." I gave him an ever-so-light tap on the right knee. Honest, it was a light tap, but the popping noise from before must have been his right knee, because Portnoy let out a high-pitched scream that ran up my spine into my head. Oops, I didn't want to be that cruel.

I also didn't want the neighbors to come in, if by some miracle they still slept, so I did the first thing I could think of. I shoved an apple from the table into his mouth. I didn't do it hard. Just placed it over his open trap to plug it up and muffle the sounds, but it was enough to push him past his breaking point.

Portnoy sat there, apple in mouth, and sobbed. It sounded kind of funny-- sort of a "muh muh muh," like a ghost or mummy.

"Look, Portnoy, I have a healing potion you can have." Evil bastard? I didn't want to be that guy. "But you gotta tell me who was behind it." Hrm, I guess I was that guy after all.

I dug up one of my better healing potions and dangled it in front of him. I watched his thoughts play out across his face like a puppet show. Act One: being all big and tough while terrorizing the runties, Act Two: getting his ass kicked by one of the aforementioned runts, and finally Act Three: crying like a little halfling and giving up his buddies in exchange for a potion to stop the pain. It was a timeless story for the ages. But then, aren't they all?

"Mrr phrrphle". Whoops. I took the apple out of his mouth. "De Grenefeld. It was all de Grenefeld's idea."

"And who is this de Grenefeld? Where do I find him?"

"Nicholas de Grenefeld. He runs the Union. I think he lives at the guild hall." Now that he had given up, Portnoy was all too willing to share. He gave me all the details I needed, but even still, he was convinced that the Union hadn't been involved in Fud's murder. I don't think he would have lied to me just then, so I gave him the healing potion and went on my way.

Or I tried to, at least. The lock was still fused and wouldn't open from this side either. I had to resort to prying it open with an iron fire poker. It was probably better that way anyhow--I didn't want Portnoy to die, after all. With the door pried open, someone would be bound to find him.

The chill of the night air felt good after my little workout, but it got me thinking and feeling guilty for Portnoy, so I went back in and threw him a blanket. I had broken his window, after all. He had drunk the potion and was sleeping away his pain, so I collected the vial--those things aren't cheap--and pulled the ratty wool blanket from his bed. I laid it on him, but no, I didn't tuck him in. Then I left and didn't look back. My conscience was doing just fine, thank you very much. Besides, I already had a battered person to look after.

I got home safe and sound, but I felt exhausted. Riding back, I almost fell asleep on Shira but managed to stay alert enough to avoid getting lost or robbed. I could have drunk an energy potion, I suppose, but I hated to rely on them too often. Overdoing it would give me the shakes again, and I didn't want to relive that part of the good old days.

Fatigue and restlessness battled in my head. I couldn't sit still while Nerni was missing, but I had no leads to follow. I'd counted on the Labor Guild's involvement, but beyond Portnoy, I had no idea how to get more information. I had a name, but everyone knew about de Grenefeld, and there was no way I could get close to him. If only I could rouse Lumo. He might be able to point me in the right direction.

I tried. I spoke to him. I shook him. I even splashed some water on his face, but the goblin wouldn't stir. He seemed to sleep peacefully, but he wouldn't wake up. Perhaps he needed more of Brae's healing. Maybe he just needed more time to recover. Either way, his slumber left me without a way to relieve my restless energy.

I pattered around the lab, but I couldn't focus my thoughts. There was nothing to do until Braenoic arrived in the morning. My best bet was to force myself to sleep so I would be awake and alert when she woke up Lumo.

I slept, but not peacefully. I had one of those dreams you get when you're completely worn out. The one that's even more weird than usual and jumps around from scene to scene at a rapid pace. When I'm working on a tough problem, those dreams will lead me to figure out the answer as my brain works through everything at night. In the morning I feel great and the problem is solved, but not that morning. Instead of solving the mystery of Fudnottin's murder by dreaming that night, my mind decided to come up with an idea for the perfect winter solstice gift for Bunkkin, one of the guys at my local pub. The problem was that we never exchange gifts, so it made no sense for my brain to be wasting all that good time by working that out. At least I forgot the gift five minutes after I woke up, but that's pretty typical with my dreams.

Once I was up and about, I checked on Lumo. He still slept like a baby, his breathing normal. He still refused to wake up, despite my best efforts.

I couldn't stand to do nothing while I waited for Braenoic. I wanted to go out and look for Nerni, but I needed Brae's help. It could prove to be critical. Lumo was the only one who knew what had happened to Nerni, and Brae was the only one who could get it out of him.

While I worked, I planned out my day. First: once Braenoic arrives, wake up Lumo, and find out who attacked him. Second: deal with the culprit and rescue Nerni and her evil mother. Third: talk to Investigator Tillman. Well, maybe do that second if the culprit turns out to be too tough to handle.

Despite Portnoy's confession, I still suspected that de Grenefeld and his Labor Guild thugs were behind Lumo's beating and Nerni's kidnapping. They wouldn't have told a scrub like him the details of their plan. But there was that nagging doubt brought on by the fact that Brae had connected Outsiders to the prototype. I didn't think the Labor Guild would have any contact with Occultists, and

they were pretty much the only ones who summoned Outsiders. But Occultists had nothing against us technologists, so why would they be involved in the murder? Could they have killed him as part of a ritual and he was just a random target? That seemed unlikely given the elaborate nature of the death. They usually went for animal sacrifices in underground caves and other power focal points. Could Fudnottin have used Outsider power for his prototype? No. He would never do that. That would make him an outcast from the clockwork maker's guild.

Could it have been a rogue mage after all? Perhaps one dabbling in the forbidden arts who summoned the Outsider? Would a mage have killed Fudnottin to stop his work? If so, why would they kidnap Nerni and Melda later on? Why not kill her at the same time?

See, this is why I like alchemy; I can get all my thoughts in order while I work. By the time I'd finished the stock solutions, I had come to the conclusion that Occultists or a rogue mage had murdered Fudnottin for some unknown reason. Then the Labor Guild came in the wake of the murder to capitalize on the fear it created. They had probably kidnapped Nerni and her evil mother, but why they did that, I had no clue. Beating people up and wrecking equipment was their style, and nothing in Fudnottin's workshop had been destroyed. Hrm, it still didn't all add up.

For good measure, I brewed up two flasks of Elixir of Life. After the scare with Lumo, I didn't want to be caught without it again. The green glow of the liquid diminished when I aliquotted it into smaller portions in bottles with re-sealable flip tops. Customers rarely used an entire bottle at once, so they preferred a bottle that could be opened and re-closed easily. It's the attention to little details that turns a good alchemist into a successful businessman. All of the bottles together on the shelf generated almost enough glow to read by. Hmmm. Maybe for the holidays, I should bring the luminescent potions upstairs and arrange them around the house. That would look festive.

Braenoic hadn't arrived by the time I finished my work, which disappointed me. If she didn't want to help me out after all, fine. She had gotten a bit high on herself since joining the Collective anyway. I would be just fine without her. Worked up a bit? Me? No chance.

Lumo still slept like a big green baby, and when I tried to wake him up, he refused to open his eyes. He seemed okay, just exhausted, so I decided to leave Braenoic a note and go pay a visit to Investigator Tillman. He might be able to help find Nerni. That was my greatest concern at the moment.

I wrote up a page of notes to give to Tillman. Hopefully what I'd figured out would be enough to convince him that Fud's death was more than just an accident. I stashed my notes with the knife and note from the door in a leather satchel and made my way to the local City Watch post, which served both my neighborhood and the Tiz.

As I rode, the sun finally decided to burn through the morning fog layer. The marine fog usually stays pretty high, so it was hard to distinguish it from low-lying clouds until the sun burned through--or didn't, in the case of the clouds. Riding in the sun melted away the aches and pains from my nocturnal activities. I rolled my head and stretched out sore muscles. Boy, I was out of shape. Back in the old days, I

would have been able to do three or four fights like that without being sore. I guess I was getting old, but I did notice a little extra spring in my step. It was good to get my blood pumping again.

It made me think about life and getting old. I aged about as gracefully as a zombie being re-interred--life had to force me kicking and fighting into the future. I suppose I was a little jealous of the elves who never aged, but they paid a high price for it by being tied to their Mother Tree. And with that gone, they were a ruined people. I guess immortality isn't such a good thing if you have to spend it the way they do. But I didn't want to worry about my age right now; I wanted to enjoy the sun while it lasted and figure out what was going on with the recent trouble that had entered my life.

The Watch post dominated a small patch of buildings that didn't belong to any district. They were north and east of Downsfield, which put them north and west of the Tiz. Further north were several housing districts with little trade or reason for someone like me to visit. The Watch probably took over the area because of its central location.

I liked to come to this part of town when I took breaks from my alchemy work, not so much for the ambiance, which was fairly bland, or lack of troublemakers, which was nice and all, or for the architecture or history. No, I liked to come here for the smells. Or rather the lack of smells, I should say. Alchemy is an odorous profession, and gnomes have a talent for it. Our noses are much more sensitive than those of other races--good for alchemy, but bad for being in an alchemy shop all day, living in the alchemy district, and having customers in the Tiz and the Arcane Quarter. Both of those places weren't quite as potent as Downsfield, but they had their own odor issues. Here, the air was blessedly inoffensive.

The Watch building itself was a monstrous edifice of carved black marble--I think it was a holdover from the Augite Empire--which probably had been chosen for its ability to cower ne'er-do-wells. The last of the Augites turned to dust centuries ago, but tales of their gruesome blood cults are still used to scare children and halflings. Long after the Augites died out, various warlords took over their building as strongholds. Xalan the Terrible held sway over this region, and he was said to have had a penchant for the finer arts of torture. To accommodate his appetite for pain, engineers expanded the building in the downward direction. The dungeons of this precinct building are said to reach seven levels down into the ground, and back in its glory days, word was that each level gave a new meaning to the word "pain" compared to the one above. When Melovous Stonebrow united--i.e. conquered--the warlord states, he outlawed the more brutal forms of torture, and the building had been handed over to the City Watch as a base of operations. I think they stored all the torture devices in a museum of sorts on the seventh level and used the rest for storage and as a prison.

I enjoyed another deep breath before I walked inside.

The Watch post was as busy as ever; a city the size of Erona had a constant stream of troublemakers coming, going, and, well, making trouble. I sometimes think about moving to another city, one where there is less crime, cleaner streets, no elves,

and all that, but then I think that such a city would be horribly boring. And such a city only exists in books and stories, so I suppose I don't have to worry about it.

No, I was settled in here, and I'd never move away. Unless I could have a castle. I'd always wanted to live in a castle, but I hear they sound better than they really are.

With a sigh, I pushed my way through to the crowded reception desk.

"Hello," I said, picking the pretty halfling lady over the grumpy-looking human receptionist and gave her my famous smile. "I'm Zook Terpin, and I need to speak with Investigator Tillman about the Fudnottin murder case."

"Sign in here, please." She was all uninterested business as she pointed me to the thick registration book. She didn't even look up from whatever it was she was reading. I'd been here before, so I knew what to do.

"Thank you. You can go in now. Third floor, first room on the right." A dismissive wave of her hand made it clear she wasn't interested in any conversation. Pity, but her loss.

Behind the reception area, I found the stairs that led up to the third-floor office where Investigator Tillman looked busy with paperwork.

"Investigator Tillman." I wasn't one for long drawn-out greetings, but I needed to say something to get his attention.

"Ah, Mr. Terpin, good to see you again." After a brief glance, he went back to looking at his papers. "All this business with the magi." He shook his head as he finished reading, then pushed the papers into a semi-ordered pile and looked up. "How is Mrs. Hodgewinkle holding up? It's so horrible to lose a loved one to such a senseless accident."

"Well, now, that's what I came to discuss with you." Taking a few minutes longer wouldn't change anything, and Tillman didn't seem like the kind of guy who would respond well to hysterics. I helped myself to a stiff wooden chair that had seen many butts over the years. The armrests were worn smooth, so I figured I was sharing karmic energy with plenty of interrogation victims--oh, sorry, I mean persons of interest. "She and her mother have disappeared."

"Disappeared? Probably staying with relatives or taking a vacation. The families often need a change of environment to help them get over their grief."

"No, I'm pretty sure it isn't that. They were both sleeping at her place, and my apprentice was there as well to keep an eye on them. I went over to see how they were doing, and found my apprentice lying on the floor, badly beaten. He's out of danger now, but still unconscious. Whoever beat him up messed up the house and, I assume, kidnapped Nerni and her mother."

The investigator stopped shuffling his paperwork and gave me his full attention.

"Go on."

"The prototype clockwork was still there, so someone else must be involved. It couldn't have been an 'industrial accident' this time."

"Okay, I'll buy that, but who do you think it might have been?"

I handed over the knife and note from my door and told him about the Labor Guild taking advantage of Fud's death to push their own agenda. "I spoke to

an acquaintance of mine in the Labor Guild last night, and he tells me that they were responsible for leaving the notes. I suspect they took Nerni and her mother, but I don't know if they killed Fudnottin."

"You have an informant in the Labor Guild?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. But the important part is that he told me the ringleader behind it was a guy named Nicholas de Grenefeld."

"De Grenefeld? I'll have to check on him with the folks down at the Docks precinct. They handle the Labor Guild, so they would know about a kidnapping. Have there been any ransom notes or anything like that?"

"No. Nothing."

"Hmm." He rubbed his wispy beard the way people who can't grow a proper beard do, as if daily massage would make it come in thicker. "I can send someone over to her house again to look for evidence, but I don't have time to deal with it right now." He indicated the piles of paperwork. "Unless the magi decide to start following the rules, I'm stuck dealing with them."

"What? Aren't you supposed to look into crimes?" Standing up didn't help me be more intimidating, but it felt good. "What do you mean you'll 'send someone over'? Who?"

"There's a lot of crime in the city. I can't drop everything for a missing person. I wish I could, but my boss told us to make the magi our priority right now. Look, I'll send my best lieutenant over. Mailong. She's good."

"When can she come look?"

"I'll take you to meet her right now." Tillman stood and led me out of the office and down the hall. It was good to see him hurrying, but he probably just wanted to get back to his paperwork. "You can bring her up to speed on everything. Be sure to tell her about the clockwork and Mr. Hodgewinkle's accident. It might be relevant."

"Oh, yeah, speaking of that, I have a Paladin friend. She found out that the prototype had been touched by Outsiders."

That brought Tillman up short.

"Outsiders?"

I nodded.

"Is your friend with the Spiritual Collective?"

"Yep. She's going to help figure out what happened."

Tillman turned and headed back to his office.

"Wait! Where are you going? What about Mailong?" I rushed after him, but he didn't stop until he sat at his desk.

"Your Paladin friend, she's sure about the Outsiders?"

"She seemed pretty sure. But what are we going to do about Nerni?"

"Look, Mr. Terpin, if the Spiritual Collective is going to get involved, there won't be much for me or anyone else in the Watch to do. They don't like to work with us, and the City Council has told us to give the Collective whatever they want in these matters."

"But Nerni...the Labor Guild probably kidnapped her, and the Collective won't deal with secular matters like that."

"Like I said, if the Collective is involved at all, we can't be. Maybe your friend can help you out. If not, see if you can get her to make an official request for us to help. Otherwise, I'll just get myself and my people in trouble."

Worthless!

"So what do I do when none of that works? You know the Collective won't do anything."

"If none of that works, you could always hire a tracker and do it yourself. But I didn't suggest that."

#

Well, the Watchmen weren't going to be any use, so it was up to me. I'd been holding back, warming up, getting back into my groove. I'd thought the proper authorities would take care of things, but now it was clear that wouldn't happen. Maybe in that ideal city, life would go smoothly and everyone would do their job, but here in the real world, the real city, you often have to fend for yourself.

I cracked my knuckles and hunkered down for the job. What to do next? I guess Tillman wasn't completely worthless after all; I did need a good tracker. Why hadn't I thought of that? I guess I still wasn't up to full speed after all. But who did I know that was still working? Maybe Braenoic would know someone, but probably not. Those Collective types don't keep company with the rangers and other nature aficionados.

All the trackers I knew were elves before their fall. Now I wasn't sure. Maybe a barbarian? They were pretty good outdoorsmen, but it would be hard to find one in the city. My best bet would be a bar, but not even a barbarian would be out drinking this early, or at least not any barbarian that I would want to hire.

All right, back home to check on Lumo and to see if Braenoic had graced my doorstep. By then, it would be getting on towards lunch, and I'd have a good chance of finding a barbarian before he got drunk.

I sat tall in the saddle as I rode home. Despite the lack of help from the City Watch, I felt good. And if Braenoic hadn't bothered to show up, screw her. I'd work it out all on my own.

When I got back, sure enough, she hadn't been there. Lumo had rolled around a bit, but was still out. I tried to wake him, but to no avail. I was getting kind of worried that he would never get up, but he had rolled around, so I suppose he just needed more time to recover. He had been beaten pretty badly and subsequently healed by divine power. That could take a lot out of a guy.

And speaking of taking a lot out of a guy, I thought of the perfect place to find a barbarian: Brothel Town. That wasn't its official name. No, officially it was called Peachfair Park, which, let's be honest, wasn't much better. But that's where the hookers plied their trade, or so I'm told, and everyone knew it as Brothel Town.

Even at this time of day, Brothel Town hopped with activity, and I mean that literally. Froglings--the humanoid cousins of swamp frogs--crowded the bars. The froglings were nocturnal by nature, and tended to work the night shift. That meant that noon was their equivalent time of day to our midnight. Most froglings loved to party, and they stayed out well past noon.

I liked the froglings because they were even shorter than I was. However, I didn't understand their language, so I could never tell what they said. They could understand the common tongue well enough, and so between that and a lot of gesturing, I'd gotten sucked into lunchtime drinking binges before.

I asked one of the ubiquitous froglings if they'd seen any barbarians hanging around, but they were all too drunk to understand. Those poor people got pigeonholed with sewer maintenance. No other beings could bear the environment down there, but the froglings didn't seem to mind. And with that reputation, they didn't migrate to work topside, as they call it, very often. Well, except for the frogling hookers that serviced the frogling clientele.

I eventually managed to catch an orc delivering casks of beer and found out which bar the barbarians were frequenting this week. They were nomads at heart, so even the city-bound barbarians kept the tradition by migrating from bar to bar on a weekly or monthly basis. The bar in question was the Pinch and Whistle, and I didn't have to guess about what went on there aside from drinking. When I found it, my suspicions were confirmed by the explicit and anatomically correct sign that hung out front above the door.

Well, Momma didn't raise no prudes. I sauntered on in and took my time scanning the room for, what was it I came here for? Oh yeah, barbarians.

The bar had a raised stage. It looked like there was room for a dozen dancers if they were the friendly type, but at this time of day, there was only one. I guess the barbarians scared the froglings away, or maybe it just wasn't on the list of frogling hot spots, since the place was empty of the slimy little fellows. That thought barely had time to register before I really noticed the dancer.

She was an elf. A tall elf. A tall elf with long, flowing red hair. Her green eyes seemed extra wide as they speared me from across the room. Of their own accord, my legs started walking in time with the sway of her hips, drawing me ever closer to the bar that encircled the stage like a moat. And with the barbarian Horde that frequented this part of town, they sure needed a moat to protect the beauty on stage.

I eased onto a stool and got lost in her gaze. There might have been other people in the bar, but I wouldn't have known. She had caught me in her spell and there was no way to break out. She could have told me to drink a vial of acid, and I would have smiled as I did it, just to earn a wink. Yep, I was long gone.

"Can you give me plats, please? It's yer job, *dood*."

Whoops, spell broken.

I tossed her a silver and let it fall short so I could enjoy the view as she picked it up. She wasn't smiling so much when she saw that it wasn't a piece of

platinum, and she turned to the other patrons after making it disappear to I don't want to know where.

Now that I'd had my fun, I got down to business. I sidled up to a likely candidate. He was a barbarian, and they all pretty much look alike to me. Over six feet tall, big muscles, long hair with bones and sticks bound up in it, and facial hair that looked like a beaver attached to his face. Actually it might have been a beaver. I wouldn't put anything involving dead animals past a barbarian. He wore some tattered leather clothes that were clearly home-made.

"Hey buddy, you a tracker?" Barbarians weren't so good with the small talk, and that was fine by me right now.

"No. Rendar crush." He downed a swig of beer that was big enough to bathe in.

"You know any trackers?"

"Hrrrrmmm." He looked at his now empty beer mug. They might be dumb, but they weren't stupid. I waved for a refill and slid the bartender the coins. Once Rendar had his beer, he gave me the goods. "You want Gunder. Gunder tracker. Best in Horde!"

"And where do I find this Gunder?"

"Ohhh, hrrrrmmm." How did he drink so fast? I got another. "Rendar take you. Gunder at other bar." Great. I was sure beer would be involved.

I was right. Introductions required two rounds for everyone, me included, but the bartender took pity and gave me a gnome-sized mug, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to keep up. The barbarians didn't really care how much I drank; it was the principle of the thing. Deals were conducted over beer, or, in a pinch, animal blood. I bought Rendar another beer for his trouble and sent him on his way so I could see about hiring Gunder.

"What you want from Gunder?"

"I need you to track someone, a gnome who was kidnapped yesterday."

"What's in it for Gunder?"

"I'll pay you five gold now, and five more when we find her."

"Is there danger?"

"There might be."

"So maybe Gunder bash some skulls too?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps not good enough. You promise Gunder bash skulls, then Gunder help you."

"Okay then, when we find them, you can bash as many skulls as you want."

Gunder smiled and revealed a mess of a snaggletoothed mouth. It was hard not to stare, but that was pretty much the norm for barbarians. It went well with the bone in his nose.

"Good, good. Now we drink!" On me, of course.

I filled in the details while we drank and pretended to run out of money in order to end the party. I suggested he use some of his new gold to buy the next round, but that earned me a dirty look.

We left shortly thereafter and made our way back to the river. I was tempted to go visit the Collective compound to see what had happened to Braenoic but decided to leave her be. If she wanted to be part of the fun, she could have come by my place this morning like she had said she would. No, she had let me down, and I realized now that I needed to take charge instead of relying on others to do their jobs. Nope, I didn't need any help, just my own wits. Well, that and the unwashed barbarian trailing behind me.

I worried about Nerni, and I suppose her evil mother too. It had been almost a day since they had disappeared, and I couldn't wait any longer.

As we approached the river bridge, I noticed two burly-looking human thugs keeping pace with us and staying back a hundred feet or so. When I see people matching my pace so exactly, my danger senses go off.

I was torn. On the one hand, I didn't want to delay by getting into a fight, but on the other hand, they might have some information. No, I had my tracker and I didn't need the delay. I picked up the pace as we crossed the bridge in order to try and lose them in the crowds. I could have done it easily enough alone, but with Gunder in tow, there was no way. Actually, he was a tracker, so he might be able to be sneaky, but if he knew there were thugs to fight, then I'd never be able to convince him to hide.

I steered us into the market square and wove a trail through a maze of carts and vendors. On the far side, I paused to look behind for signs of the thugs. We seemed to have left them behind, so I breathed a sigh of relief. Of course as soon as we rounded the last cart on our way back to the path to Nerni's, we ran smack into them, and they looked as bewildered as I probably did.

Spinning on my heel, I pulled Gunder back into the crowds. He was still blissfully unaware of what went on and marveled at the sights of the Tiz district market. It was an impressive sight, even for a crusty old gnome like me who'd seen plenty of weird stuff, but for a barbarian it must have seemed like a dream, or nightmare, what with all the bizarre-looking clockworks, stinky potions, and so on.

It probably would have worked out all right, except for one thing: one of the thugs yelled out for us to stop.

Gunder's head snapped around to focus his attention on the man who had skidded to a halt within a hand's span of the wall of muscle. More than a head taller than the thug, Gunder looked down at the man who had grown a few shades paler.

"Maybe Gunder bash some skulls now." He said it in a tone that seemed much too quiet and controlled for a member of the Barbarian Horde, but the tone caused the thugs to scurry back a step. It looked like we would be okay. Gunder had scared them and gave us a chance to get back to finding Nerni without a big delay.

Then Gunder let out a roar and charged the thugs.

Damn.

He probably didn't need my help, but I waded into the fray swinging my cane. It's great for blocking, and what could be more fun than using the crook to trip your opponent? It didn't take long before Gunder and I stood over the unconscious bodies of the two thugs. A huge grin spread across his face as Gunder looked at the fallen foes.

"Gunder feels better now."

"Good, I'm happy for you. Now can we please get back to business? I'm not paying you by the hour."

"Gunder sorry." He looked genuinely sorry.

"It's okay. We'll find some more skulls for you to bash." That seemed to perk him up again.

I searched the thugs but only found a few coins and other random bits of pocket flotsam. No identifying marks, but if I had to guess, I'd say Labor Guild. The Occultists shouldn't have any beef with me, and I hadn't pissed anyone else off recently as far as I could recall. Maybe I shouldn't have beat Portnoy up so much last night. Or else I should have finished the job.

Huh? That was the old Zook talking. I thought I'd left the old me way behind when I had settled down, but I suppose all the excitement had brought him back along with everything else. Well, no time to worry about that now, we had to get to Fudnottin's and find Nerni's trail.

When we arrived, we found that the normal crowd of protesters had thinned out. Maybe they knew no one was home and didn't want to get implicated in the violence. Or maybe they did have a little respect for their fellow beings. Probably not, but you never know. The remaining crowd parted like a hooker's legs as Gunder came through. Barbarians didn't have a good reputation, but they were mostly harmless if you knew how to talk to them. Most city folks shunned and avoided the primitive people, whom they consider to be savages. But barbarians actually have quite a complex culture and society.

They did, however, lack technological sophistication. Even their magic was undeveloped. It was an odd mixture of divinely-based tribal prayers mixed with some shamanistic arcane bits thrown together for flavor to create a very unique system. Their trackers were famous for using a combination of tribal magic and path-finding skills to follow a trail.

I had locked up Fud's place and taken a key when we left last time, so it wasn't hard to get in. I shouted and quickly scanned the structure, but no one was home, and more importantly, there were no unpleasant surprises waiting for us.

Once that was settled, I took Gunder into the workshop. It was undisturbed, but the stench had changed. With the body gone, most of the odor of decay had ventilated out, but the blood and remaining bits of gore hadn't gotten any fresher. Actually, there was more of that metallic sharpness in the air now that the blood was dry.

"This is where the first gnome got killed. His wife, Nerni, was taken from here later." I explained how Lumo had brought Nerni's evil mother here and how I'd found him--beaten and left for dead--with the two women gone.

"Gunder understand. Now you shut up and let Gunder work." He gave me a little shove towards the front door that sent me sprawling. Barbarians didn't realize their own strength sometimes, and Gunder was clearly distracted. Eyes closed, he hummed and murmured an incantation. Then he wandered through the house touching an object here, staring at some invisible spot on the floor there. I followed him around; he was a member of the Barbarian Horde, after all, and they were

known for looting. Over the course of a good half an hour, he wandered the house, until finally he ended at the back door of the workshop leading to the alley.

"This way."

He led the way into the alley. The sulfur smell still lingered but was weaker now. Could it have been from someone summoning an Outsider instead of from the dwarven smelters nearby? Perhaps. That would make sense.

The trail led Gunder through a maze of back alleys and short tunnels under and around the buildings of the Tiz, eventually dumping us at an access point to the sewers. Damn. I knew I would wind up in the sewers again one day. I took a fond last look at my fine clothes, not having the heart to tell them that they would have to be burned later. Except the belt. I could never put the belt out of its misery, no matter how skanky it got, but I'd have to deal with that later. Right now I had to deal with worrying about wearing low boots into the sewers.

"Gunder, are you sure the path leads down there?"

He just crossed his arms and stared at me.

"Okay, okay. Let's get this over with."

I took a closer look at the rusty metal door embedded in the stone wall. It had the unmistakable symbol of the city's Waste Service emblazoned in its center, but the door wasn't the same as the rest that I'd seen in the past. No, this one had a mangled metal hole where the lock should have been. It looked like someone had rammed a burning spike into where the key would have gone and worked it around until there was a hole big enough for a gnome to stick his arm through, if the gnome wasn't worried about lacerating his arm on the jagged metal that, no doubt, crawled with infectious nasties.

"That doesn't look like the Labor Guild's style, does it?"

Gunder just grunted and scratched himself. I took that as agreement.

Well, I was in charge, so I got to do the honors. The door was hinged to swing out, but some internal latch held it closed. Scrunching up my body as if that would make my arm smaller, I gingerly reached in and felt around for the latch.

A mucous-like film coated the inside, and I had to choke back a gag while I worked. Most of the moving parts in there no longer wanted to move, but hey, there it was. To reach the latch, I had to stand on my tiptoes and must have looked funny with my arm in the door up to my elbow. But once I closed my grip around it, I could work on raising it.

The mucus, or whatever it was, made it difficult to keep a good grip, and I feared slipping and gashing my arm on the jagged metal. Healing potions only go so far, and I did not want to test them against the junk on the metal.

My sense of self-preservation tempted me to have Gunder bash the thing down, but a) the noise might alert our quarry, and b) he would probably want more money. So I resolved myself to try, wiped the slime off as best I could, and gave the latch a hard tug.

At first it didn't budge, but then all at once it clacked open. I was pulling so hard that I lost my balance and slipped on the gravel-strewn path that had led us to the door.

Now, I'm pretty quick, or at least I was back in my heyday, but I wasn't quick enough. Snaking my arm as best I could as I fell, I got it most of the way out but not all the way in time. My wrist caught on a sharp jaggy which tore a two-inch gash.

I don't like pain, not one bit, and I swore like a drunken sailor who forgot his money while on leave in a whorehouse. Gunder looked impressed.

"You sound like Gunder's mother."

"Yeah, well, I can believe it if she had to give birth to you."

My blood slicked the front of the door as well as my torn shirt. It was coming a lot faster than I normally like--not that any blood flow is good, mind you, but sometimes when it flows fast, a healing potion won't work. I'd had a lot of experience over the years, so I could deal with it, but it would require most of my healing potions, and we didn't have time to get more. Of all the bad luck.

I sat on the ground so I could work fast. I tore my shirt sleeve all the way up and used the floppy ends to tie a tourniquet around my upper arm. An extra knot at just the right spot let me slow the blood flow to my arm, but it didn't stop completely. Once I'd done that, I didn't have much time, so I retrieved and unstopped all three of my healing potions. I hoped I wouldn't need them all, but once you start, it's better not to stop to get more potions out.

The first potion went to rinse out the wound. Holding my arm down, I poured it into the gash and let it flow with the blood. It became a fizzing torrent that ran from the wound across my palm and pooled into a bubbly depression on the dirty ground of the alley. I hoped it would clean out any infection, but that door was nasty and I wasn't sure my potion would be strong enough. I'd have to do better once I got home, but that might be a while.

The first potion also helped slow the blood flow, which was good because the second potion would have to sit in the wound for a while to work properly. For that, I cradled my arm in my lap and filled the gash with the pale blue liquid like a bowl of soup. It mixed with the still-oozing blood to form purplish-colored bubbles that made me think of the red sparkling wine that the elves no longer brewed. When it got too bloody, I dumped the liquid on the ground and refilled it. It took three rounds of that to make the blood stop flowing, and there wasn't enough healing potion left to drink.

While I worked, I decided that I should drink some potion too, in order to prevent an infection, but now I was torn. If I drank the last potion, I wouldn't have it around later, but on the other hand, if I got a systemic infection, the potion wouldn't do me any good.

Screw it. I didn't want to lose my arm or worse to an infection, so I tossed the last potion back like a shot of whisky.

Gunder looked bored.

"Why did you do that? Now you won't have impressive scars like Gunder has." He flashed me some leg from beneath his leather kilt so I could stare in awe at the spider's web of scars that covered his right leg.

"What did that?" Standing up meant I didn't have to look at it any longer. Thankfully, he put the leg away.

"Horde raided the swamp troll villages, and Gunder fell in the water. Trolls keep crocodiles for pets, and big nasty croc try to eat Gunder's leg. But Gunder teach croc that Gunder not food."

It was then that I noticed his belt was made from crocodile skin. He saw me staring at it and gave me a wink. After thinking about a wink from the dancing elf maiden, his wink seemed rather out of place.

"All right, let's get going. The door should be opened now." I levered the end of my cane in the hole and pried the door open.

Reaching through the slimy hole had given me a preview whiff of the scents below, but now that the door was wide open, the brute force of the foul odor struck me like a charging rhino.

Gunder didn't seem to mind as he forged ahead. I cautioned him that we might run into the ones we sought, so we should be careful, but he wasn't worried. In fact, seemed to perk up at the idea of another fight.

Down in the darkness of the sewer I saw an odd glow emanating from Gunder's eyes. I thought maybe he had been taken over by an Outsider, but he assured me otherwise.

"Gunder learned this trick from shaman. Lets me see in the dark like an elf. Good for tracking."

I followed his lead and did my best to avoid stepping in anything liquid or on anything that wasn't clearly a building stone. These sewers predated modern Erona, which was built on the ruins of an ancient civilization. With the river meeting the sea, it was just too perfect of a spot not to build on, but with the soft, water-soaked ground, the ruins of the lost society were too unstable to live in. It did make a nice foundation, though, or so I'm told.

The result was that an extensive maze of sewers runs under the entire center of the city. Out in the far reaches where the city expanded in more recent years, there were no ruins, and thus modern sewer systems were in place. But here, we made do with the ruined streets, buildings, and so forth as our sewers. The system wasn't designed to be efficient, and since the sinking ground had warped or destroyed much of the original structure, the sewers needed constant maintenance, hence all the frogling workers.

If I'd have tried to find my way around here, I'd have been lost forever. I was extra glad to have Gunder along to navigate.

By the time we'd traveled fifteen minutes, my nostrils had gone numb from the stench. My nose responded to the pungent aroma in the same way my tongue can't taste for a while after I burn it on hot tea. I hoped I hadn't done permanent damage.

As we picked our way through the rubble and feces, I thought that the Labor Guild looked less and less like the culprit. Why would they travel through the sewers? Not even the freelance thieves and organized crime syndicates used the sewers on account of the smell and rumors of monster and hauntings.

It was, however, a perfect place for a group of Occultists to have their hideout.

Processing these thoughts, I hardly paid attention to the ruins around me. I'd seen more than my share in the past, and they were all pretty much the same when you got right down to it--unless you're the kind of person who actually likes to study ancient civilizations, in which case each stone was a treasure trove of information about the varied nuances that separated one unique society from the next. Me, I usually just looked for signs of hidden treasure. Today I looked for signs of my lost friend. Oh, and her evil mother.

Well, actually Gunder did the looking and I followed along, trying to breathe through my mouth.

The sewers weren't completely dark--no, light came from luminescent lichen or algae or whatever it was that grew everywhere. I think the froglings brought it with them from wherever they came from and grew it down here as a crop. It wouldn't have been enough for a human to see by, but froglings have excellent night vision, and they would have no trouble down here. Gnomes are the same, so I was okay, and Gunder's night vision spell seemed to keep him happy.

The trail led us deeper and deeper underground, until we passed into an area where, by some trick of fluidics, the sewage stagnated and decomposed. I suppose an horticulturalist would love the soil down here--an opportunity for making some profit? I could hire froglings to bring the soil up and then sell it. Hmm. Fiscal possibilities aside, I didn't want to be within nose range of the soil. It hadn't fully transformed and so the odors were all the more pungent.

As we walked, I stopped noticing the smell so much. Either I was getting used to it, or else my nose had suffered permanent damage. But I couldn't leave Nerni down here, so we pressed on.

The walls down this deep were no longer building ruins. No, we had moved into real live caves. Gnomes dwelled underground long, long ago, so whenever I'm in a natural cavern, I feel a little something in my bones. Maybe the rocks call to me, or maybe it is a deep-rooted gnomish trait, but whatever it is, it made me feel comfortable.

The tunnel had formed naturally as a path through a pile of huge boulders. Perhaps it had been a large cavern at one point that got filled in by a cave-in. Most of the crevices had been plugged with the pungent dirt, but the path we followed had been worn smooth.

I had to stoop a bit to get through one spot, which meant that Gunder had to crawl, but it only lasted a short while, and I was relieved not to find an ambush waiting on the far side. Instead, we found an open cave--roughly the size of a banquet hall--strewn with gnome-sized boulders.

Corpses littered the ground as well. Most were animal, but there appeared to be a decomposing humanoid every so often along the path. Before long, they were joined by Occultist symbols, which were painted on the rocks with what I hoped was faded brown, crusty paint.

Since we neared our prey's den, we took extra care to be silent as we crept towards an opening in the far end of the cave that glowed orange with a soft light.

The light flickered, causing shadows to dance on the walls in the way that only flames can. Big flames.

I heard the scrunch of feet on ground and motioned for Gunder to hide off to one side of the opening. He obliged me but started limbering up his arms. He didn't look like he would let a chance to bash skulls go by, so I readied myself for a fight.

Two scrawny-looking humans walked through the opening into the cave and managed not to see us. They had shaved their entire bodies smooth--well, I couldn't see under their loincloths, so I had to assume, but I was glad to leave that part to the unknown. They had also painted their bodies red, which made their elaborate bone necklaces stand out all the more in stark contrast.

They kept walking up the path, so I gestured for Gunder to follow me inside. He didn't.

"Hey, you!" Gunder apparently liked the straightforward approach.

The pair of Occultists turned with shocked looks and gasped at the two of us. I guess they didn't expect to see a huge barbarian and runty gnome at their doorstep, but their surprise didn't last long, and they didn't hesitate to show us a proper greeting. They both yelled and charged us.

I sidestepped mine, and then, as he passed, hooked one of his legs with my cane and yanked. He stumbled and hopped a few steps, but he couldn't get his foot free and had to make a swan dive into the rock wall. When he rose, blood flowed down over his face from a gash on his forehead. With no eyebrows to divert the flow, the blood blinded him. I hooked him around the neck and pulled his head down so I could knee him in the face. I twisted around behind him, keeping hold of his neck with my cane, and used his momentum to haul him to the ground. His head hit the rocky ground with a wet thud that put him out for the duration. It was an elegant and fluid series of moves, if I do say so myself.

Grinning, I looked over at Gunder, who sat on his Occultist cleaning a fingernail.

"Why you take so long?"

"Shut up and get back to tracking." Damn show-off. Of all the barbarians in the world, I had to find the one with a sense of humor.

I worried that the sounds of our scuffle would alert the other Occultists to our presence, but when I heard the uninterrupted chanting from below, I knew that I needn't have. The path led down to an open pit of a room, which had a dirt floor ten feet below and a walkway that circled the top rim. In the center of the pit, which was about fifty feet across, a bonfire blazed, sending fingers of orange flame dancing up to the ceiling. The light threw freaky shadows dancing around the walls as I took in the scene.

It was an Occultist temple all right. Outsider symbols were painted on the walls, floor, ceiling, and pretty much any roughly flat surface. I didn't know much about the Outsiders, but I recognized a few of the symbols. The ones I recognized were usually used for containment, which wasn't a good sign for us. A giant containment hexagon within a circle within a hexagon circumscribed the bonfire. I wanted to say the lines of the containment diagram were made from refined sulfur,

but it could have been any yellowish powder. My nose was still numb from the sewage stench.

Six priests knelt at the power points around the containment symbol, heads down, hands together, chanting away in some guttural language I'd never heard before. I knew they were priests because they had not only the painted bodies and bone necklaces, but also headgear that had been designed to resemble an Outsider. These appeared to have been made from the skulls of some large animal--perhaps a bull--with curved horns. The horns were serrated, as if someone filed them or attached shark teeth along the upper surface. I suppose all of that didn't necessarily make the chanters priests, but I like to attach labels to things in order to help me make sense of the world and keep everything orderly. So whatever they were, they were priests to me. They were so wrapped up in their chanting that there was no way they would notice us, unless we broke their concentration.

Four guards, who looked like the fellows we'd met in the outer cave, but bearing long, curved knives with serrated blades at their belts, stood back against the wall below and to the left of us, watching the people I'd decided were priests. They guarded Nerni, who was chained to the wall. She appeared unharmed, if dirty, but she sobbed uncontrollably. Completing the group was a weaselly looking human who stood taller than a gnome, but still short for a human. He wore a brown monk's robe that matched the color of his stubbly hair and beard. The monk hovered at the right side of the pit, at the base of the stairs that led up to the walkway at the top. The way he constantly touched his head and scrunched his shoulders made me nervous, as if whatever bothered him rubbed off on me. For some reason, he seemed familiar. I'd seen the monk somewhere before, but where? Probably at the Collective compound when I visited Braenoic.

Before I could finish the thought, a large bowl full of thick, red liquid splashed onto the flames, extinguishing them with a hiss of steam. There hadn't been enough liquid to put out a fire that big, but there it was, completely out and replaced by steam. The steam, however, did not behave normally. Instead of dissipating, it coalesced into a dense humanoid form.

And then I realized that my initial scan of the room had missed two key people.

One missing person was a priest with a nightmarish bone headdress and matching necklace, and the other was Melda. I'd missed them because when we came in the fire had hid them. When the steam coalesced, they became visible.

Melda lay naked and motionless on a sloping rock, spread-eagled. Leather thongs tied her hands and feet to stakes in the ground. Her body had been painted with ritual symbols, and her stomach had been opened up with a jagged ceremonial knife that lay covered in blood at her side. Her blood continued to dribble down a channel in the low altar and drip into a collection bowl.

I stood there frozen, shocked into speechlessness by what I saw. The same wasn't true for Gunder.

"Son of Il'thor!"

Not even the invocation of the barbarian god of mercy was enough to erase the horror of the scene in the pit, but it was enough to get everyone's attention.

The head priest looked up at us for a moment with the blank skeleton eyes of his mask, and then he let loose an ear-piercing scream. At the noise, the guards spotted us, drew their knives, and ran across the room to the stairs on the far side. The monk cowered back to let them pass, and then in the ensuing melee, he disappeared. The other priests continued to kneel at the vertices of the containment hexagon and chant, oblivious to everything around them.

I didn't have time to set up any elaborate traps or get tricky with my remaining potions. Instead, I shoved Gunder towards the approaching guards. He had that Horde look on his face that told me he was filled with battle rage and wouldn't respond to my voice. Point him in the right direction and let him go, that was all I needed to do.

I couldn't do much from behind Gunder. The path was small and he was big. I thought he would have used the axe hanging on his belt, but apparently bare hands were more fun, seeing as how he punched and gouged his way through the guards. They were not so sporting and used their knives against him. He got numerous cuts on his burly forearms as he fought but didn't seem to notice. At one point, he wrapped his expansive hand around one guard's entire face, lifted him from the ground, and tossed him down into the pit.

The guard's feet caught on the lip of the pit, causing him to tumble and land on his head. I heard a distinctive crunch that sounded like a rather large and quite fresh carrot snapping in two. The guard's legs twitched a little, but he never got up. As I watched, the head priest moved and drew my attention away from the action on the upper path. He had his jagged knife in hand and advanced on Nerni. Time for Zook to come to the rescue!

The priest made the mistake of focusing on his target rather than being aware of the situation around him. When he got close enough, I jumped and plowed into him, feet first, striking him in the left shoulder. He spun back and collapsed at the same time, making us end up in a tangled pile. I recovered and jumped to my feet to find him standing between me and the fire, knife held out at the ready. Clearly I had played this game more than him, and he only knew how to use the knife for rituals, not fighting.

I spun to the right to gain momentum, snapped my head around to keep him in sight, and then whipped the cane in a wide arc. The world seemed to slow down as I watched the crook end of the cane slice through the air. The priest lunged forward with the knife just as the stick came around and struck him on the back of the hand. I stared with a detached curiosity as the flesh of his hand bowed in, cupping the end of the stick like a reversed palm. I could see the bones broken at odd angles as the stick swept his hand aside. The hand opened spasmodically and the force of the blow sent the knife spinning across the pit.

I met the priest's eyes through his mask and saw the surprise. Then I let my momentum carry me around in another spin as he continued past me. My back was to him for a moment as we passed, but it was long enough for him to reach Nerni and grab her by the throat with his left hand. The other hung limp at the end of his right arm and flopped about like a rag as he moved.

Luckily, he didn't have the knife, but his arm looked strong enough to strangle Nerni in short order. We all stood still for a moment that lasted an eternity. His dark eyes stared out at me with the cold detachment of the insane, or the undead. I knew as we stared at one another that I couldn't bargain for Nerni's life. He wasn't a rational person; he was more of an animal, an Outsider thrall that had no remorse, no thought of self-preservation. He wasn't holding Nerni to make a deal for his life. He was preparing to finish his summoning. Melda's blood had opened the door to the Outside, and Nerni's would invite the Outsider in. Already he mumbled an incantation, his voice raising. I saw his knuckles go white and knew I was out of time.

I grabbed my cane by the bottom with both hands, wound up for the hardest strike I could, and cracked the metal end of the crook into the temple of the priest kneeling next to me. That got the head priest's attention. His grip on Nerni's neck slacked and he yelled.

"No!" It was long and drawn-out as time continued to expand.

Three things happened at once. The priest I hit stopped chanting with an "urk" and began to slowly topple over, the head priest released Nerni and jumped forward to catch his fallen comrade, and Nerni dropped to the floor clutching her neck and gasping for air. I rushed forward to help her and out of the corner of my eye saw the unconscious priest land on the powdery sulfur of the containment hexagon just as the head priest reached him. Hugging Nerni felt wonderful, but I couldn't help but wonder if maybe slugging the chanting priest hadn't been such a wise move. Oh, well, no time for regrets.

Nerni coughed as we hugged, but she seemed all right.

Nerni's hands were manacled by a pitted iron chain strung through a similar ring set in the wall above her head. The chain was long and didn't look too sturdy. Acid should do the trick. I dug in my belt for one of my last remaining vials. She had to get free in a hurry, so I went for the messy and wasteful approach and splashed the acid all over the chain where it ran through the ring and let the acid etch the corroded iron while I pulled Nerni to her feet.

"Grab your chains and pull as hard as you can!"

She still had trouble breathing, but she nodded her head and dug in her heels. When the chain links were stressed from the acid and tension, I let loose a massive swing with my cane. The mystery metal at the end of the cane connected with the chain and crushed it against the ring. The iron links shattered and fell to the floor. So did Nerni.

I helped her up and dragged her towards the stairs.

"Mum!" she cried and reached out for Melda's body.

Her cry drew my attention back to the center of the room, and I realized that our situation had changed somewhat. And not necessarily for the better.

The head priest hadn't managed to close the containment hexagon, and the Outsider struggled to break free. I guess those Outsiders are quick; they don't like being summoned, and they really don't like being controlled. I wouldn't either, so I suppose I couldn't blame it for trying to escape before the final spells were put into place. If it had to be here, it might as well have some fun on its forced vacation, right?

Apparently, "fun" for Outsiders involves wholesale slaughter.

I hadn't had much chance to study the Outsider until now. It was taller than a human, about the size of Gunder, but with wider shoulders and scrawnier legs. Mostly humanoid, it had curved horns that started behind the ears and swept forward over the top of the head almost down to the eyes, where they took a sharp turn forward to fine points. Spikes grew out of its shoulders and down its back into a stubby tail. The effect was especially eerie since it was still formed from the bloody steam. But it was solid enough.

It had the head priest by the neck, much in the same way he had held Nerni. The Outsider casually plunged its misty claw into the priest's chest, dug around for a minute while the priest screamed in agony, and finally pulled out his liver. It turned towards me with its vacant holes for eyes, tilted its head back, and swallowed the liver. I was ready to vomit but tried to be strong for Nerni's sake. I didn't know how long I'd last, though.

Nerni was oblivious to the growing menace behind her as she tore at the leather thongs holding her mother's corpse to the stone. I tried to help but stood transfixed by the Outsider, which appeared to be eating the head priest from the inside out. Now it held the priest's opened gut to its face and ate like a pig at a trough.

This time I lost control and had to spin away to protect Nerni from my vomit. When I finished throwing up--which took a minute since the sounds of the Outsider eating produced several aftershocks--I saw the ceremonial knife.

The other priests still chanted away as if nothing had happened. I guessed that their efforts kept the Outsider from coming out to get us, so I left them alone and scrambled for the knife. I got it and held it up proudly for Nerni to see. I stood up just in time to get hit in the head by the booted foot of one of the guards as he flew down from the upper rim of the pit.

I fell to the floor and dropped the knife when I hit. Lying on my side, I had a perfect view of the guard lying on top of one of the formerly chanting priests, with their bodies straddling another side of the containment hexagon. The Outsider

dropped the head priest and spun to see the latest crack in his cage. Now, I might have been woozy from getting hit in the head again, but I would swear that I saw it rub its hands together and giggle.

The Outsider now had some form to go with his steamy body. I saw the liver I'd watched him eat earlier hanging there in its proper place along with a heart, lungs, stomach, and other less easily identified parts. The parts jiggled around with each step it took, and they seemed to be functioning. Seeing the body parts floating in the steamy body of the Outsider made me stare in awe. How did they stay up? I couldn't tear my eyes away.

I knew things had gone from bad to worse when the Outsider extended one steamy foot over the sulfur lines and went to work on the second course of his meal. It paused to look at me, even though it didn't have eyes . . . yet. And the sight of the blood mixing with the steam of its face brought back my good friend nausea. I didn't vomit, but I did gag and dry heave a little. For once, I was glad to be sick because doubling over broke my view of the Outsider and let me move again.

Time for action. Time to get out of there before we all got killed. I scooped up the knife and bolted across the room to slash Melda's arms free.

"Gunder! Get down here!"

Gunder had done well. One of the guards was out of sight and another lay motionless, half hanging from the lip of the pit. Then of course there was the one that currently fed the Outsider. That left one more, who grappled with the big barbarian. At my yell, Gunder looked down and saw what had transpired in the pit below. He nodded at me, knowing what to do. Then he picked up the last guard, and threw him, arms and legs flailing, mouth screaming, at the chanting priest next to the Outsider.

I wanted to cry.

There was no time, however, since a whole face of the containment hexagon had been opened. With a priest gone on disparate vertices, the Outsider had remained fairly well contained. Now that two vertices in a row were knocked out, the Outsider was free to roam, which it did with glee. The thing kicked the sulfur lines open and danced on the bodies. Its foot had some organic mass to it now and wasn't just blood-soaked steam. More bad news.

I tore off my cloak and threw it over Melda. Nerni helped me lift her mother and we crab-walked up the stairs, all the while trying to avoid the Outsider's notice. It seemed preoccupied with alternately kicking apart the sulfur containment hexagon and snacking on the priests and guards, but I didn't think it would stay that way for long. I didn't want to be around when it needed more entertainment.

"Gunder! Carry!" I breathed hard. "Be careful, it's her mother."

"Gunder understand." He lifted Melda's body and cradled it like a baby.

I put my arm around Nerni and urged everyone out of the room. It was time to go. I took one last look at the Outsider as we left. It had someone's eyes now and looked back at me. As I turned to leave, it didn't wink at me so much as make its right eyeball rotate down and back up again. That was kind of creepy.

We reached the surface without further incident, which was a good thing, since none of us were in any condition to fight anymore. After the rush of combat wore off, I felt exhausted and needed a beer and a bed.

It seemed like we'd been underground for hours, so I was understandably surprised to open the sewer door and step into the afternoon light. Blinking in the bright sunlight that made its way in shafts through the patchy clouds, I ushered Nerni and Gunder to the surface.

We collapsed on the ground and had to rest up against the stone wall that formed one side of the alley. I contemplated my next move, but I was still shaken by Melda's horrific death.

It just didn't seem possible for her to be dead, and in such a fashion. In fact, I thought I could hear her moaning from beyond the Pale Wall that separates the world of the living from the world of death. No potion was strong enough to bring someone back over the wall. Priests sometimes claimed that ability, but it was always a sham. The only way for people to return over the Wall was as one of the undead, in which case it wasn't really the same person returning.

My thoughts about the Pale Wall distracted me, but I could have sworn that I heard Melda groan. I bolted upright and then peeled the sticky cloak away from her face so I could peer into her eyes. Yes, there was a spark of life left in her!

I fumbled at my belt for a healing potion, and then a hollow sickening filled my stomach. Melda lay there, one foot over the Wall, and I'd used them all up.

Nerni half slept in the afternoon light, and she didn't realize that Melda still lived.

"Nerni!" I gave her a shake to bring her back to attention. "Melda is alive, but just barely."

Nerni's eyes opened in a flash and she sprang to her mother's side, face pressed close.

"Mum! Hold on! Zook will save you!" She cradled Melda's face with her hands as tears rolled down her nose. "Please Mum, don't die!"

I felt horrible for having used the potions before. But how was I to know that Occultists had taken Nerni and Melda? I should have planned better. I should have kept a stash of backup potions nearby, at Nerni's place. There were many things I should have done differently, but I hadn't. I had done what I had done, and now Melda paid the price.

I don't know when I'd gotten up, but now I found myself running down the street once again, back to my house to get my strongest healing potion. I hoped it would be enough and that I would return in time.

Nerni hadn't known death the way I had, so to have two loved ones die in such gruesome fashions and a mere day apart would likely destroy her. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't, not when I had any strength left.

The buildings flew past as I ran. I dodged and weaved in and around the slow-moving pedestrians and made it to my place in record time. The fresh bottles of the Elixir of Life were right where I'd left them on the shelf. I wrapped two bottles in a clean rag and placed them in a backpack. I quaffed the last Sleep-Be-Gone potion

from my belt since it was handy and then I ran back out into the street. I ran smack into another pair of Labor Guild "representatives."

This I did not need right now.

"That's him. Grab him!"

I was tangled up with the smaller of the two, while the other stood to the side and yelled at his buddy to grab me. I couldn't waste my time with these pissants--I had to get the potion to Melda.

I launched myself forward with a mighty lunge that toppled the two of us, with me on top. I could feel the human's breath on my face as the our fall knocked the wind out of his lungs. While he was stunned, I kicked him in the crotch and gave him two swift punches in the nose. Humans tend to freak out when hit on the nose, so I hoped to disorient him long enough to get away.

It worked. He reached up to protect his face with one hand and down to protect his groin with the other, so I leapt off him and escaped down the street. His buddy probably followed me, but in the dense afternoon crowds, my small stature gave me the edge.

I raced back to the alley behind Nerni's to find her hugging Gunder, sobbing. Gunder saw me and shook his head slowly back and forth. I was too late. I knelt beside Melda and felt for a pulse, but there was none. Her eyes were dark and stared, lifeless, across the Wall, so I shut them in order to help her make the journey without looking back. It was the least I could do.

I'd brought her into it by having Lumo fetch her. I'd let her down by not finding them in time. I'd killed her by selfishly using all of my healing potions. And there was nothing I could do about it now.

"No!" I pounded my fists against the stone wall until they were bloody. I deserved far, far worse. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I cried at my helplessness. I wished for the Labor Guild thugs to show up. It would have been perfect if they had, because I wanted to kill someone right now.

But no. I had nothing to deflect my anguish. No way to avoid thinking about my failure. Nothing to do but cry. I wanted to hug Nerni, but I didn't deserve it. How could I face her now? She wouldn't want to see me ever again.

I couldn't leave her and Melda out in the alley, though, so I placed my cloak over Melda's face once again and picked her up.

"Bring Nerni inside, Gunder."

I turned before Nerni looked up--I couldn't bear to look her in the eyes. It was easier to lead the way back to her place. I laid Melda in the workshop and had Gunder take Nerni to her room. When he came back down, I gave him one of the bottles of healing potion and ten more gold pieces.

"Here is the five for tracking them, and another five for the fighting. I couldn't have gotten them out without your help."

"No, Gunder won't take extra. Gunder enjoy fight and Gunder want to punish the red men." He smashed his fist into his palm. "Gunder ready to punish them again."

He tried to give me back the extra gold but I wouldn't take it.

"Keep it for another job. Make sure Nerni uses the healing potion, and get those chains off her. Can you stay here to guard her while she rests? I have to go take care of some unfinished business."

"You not stay?"

"No. I have to make sure that Outsider thing doesn't get loose in the city. And I know just the person to take care of it. She owes me for letting me down once today."

Now the sorrow and grief of Melda's death transformed into anger. I would make someone pay. Lots of someones.

"Okay. Gunder stay here and guard, but when you come back?"

"I don't know. Tonight, I hope."

"Hmm. Maybe Gunder see what they have to eat."

He kept talking, but I didn't hear it. My mind raced as I made my plans. First things first: find Braenoic.

There wasn't much time if we wanted to catch the Outsider before it got too much power, so I saddled up Fudnottin's pony and galloped across town toward the Collective compound. I decided to take the first bridge and run along the south side of the river in order to avoid meeting any more of my Labor Guild friends, and so I made it there in record time with no incident. All in all, it was the most boring trip I'd had since this whole adventure began.

The reason for the trip, however, was not boring. I didn't have much experience with Outsiders--I'd tangled with relatively minor ones back in the day, but those were the pixies of the Outside, mere annoyances, nothing like the monstrosity feeding and growing in the sewers.

My temper cooled somewhat as I rode, but I still held Braenoic to some of the blame. With the evidence of Outside influence, she should have been there with me early this morning like she had promised. Letting me down wasn't a good way to rekindle our friendship. She couldn't make up for Melda's death, but she could stop the Outsider before it killed again. One thing I did know about Outsiders is that they feed on death and destruction. The more they killed, the harder they were to stop. Our best chance was to nip this one in the bud, if that possibility still remained.

Braenoic wasn't in her quarters when I arrived, so I stomped around making a ruckus to force someone to tell me where she was. They don't like disorder at the Spiritual Collective. They tried to throw me out on the street, but when I told them that I was on official business related to an Outsider menace they let me pass. The Outsiders are the archrivals of the Spiritual Collective . . . well, unless you count the City Council and the Collective's bid for political power. So the clerk I intimidated was all too happy to take me to Braenoic and escape any perceived Outsider influence that came with me.

The clerk bade me knock on the office door he showed me to, but I didn't have the patience, so I burst in on a most interesting sight.

And what a sight it was: Braenoic sitting in a comfy chair across the desk from a Pope or Archbishop or Grand Pooh-bah or whatever it is they have for ranking officers. They were startled by my entrance, but no more startled than I was to see the weaselly monk from the pit sitting in a chair next to Braenoic.

"I . . . he . . . what . . ." I couldn't seem to form a coherent sentence, so I just pointed and grunted at him. The monk's eyes flashed open for a moment and then narrowed down to slits.

"Zook! What are you doing here?" Braenoic was almost as surprised by my appearance as I was by the monk's.

I was exhausted and my brain wasn't working at full capacity. The whole scene seemed wrong, and I didn't know how Braenoic and the monk were connected, but I did know that the monk had been there when Melda was killed and hadn't done anything about it.

I yelled. I let loose a roar that made them jump back in their seats and throw their hands up for protection. Then, as Braenoic stood to intercept me, I lunged for the monk. I didn't know where I'd left my cane, but I didn't care. I wanted to feel his neck in my bare hands.

The Supreme High Chancellor fell over backwards trying to escape the room as I grappled with the monk. I only cared about the monk. I ignored the others and focused my attention on him. When I dove and hit him, we tumbled to the ground and became entangled with each other and the chair. His legs were caught, so I grappled with his upper body. I couldn't grab the stubble on his head and chin, but I hugged his head as tight as I could and kicked blindly.

He struggled to get me off, which caused his stubble to rub my cheek raw, but I held tight and kicked him in the kidneys with my muck-filled boots. With each blow, I heard a "whuff" and felt him flinch. Then, before I could finish the job, rough hands closed about my shoulders and ripped me off of the monk.

Braenoic tossed me to the ground and sat on my chest while everyone else left the room.

In the back of my foggy mind, those forbidden emotions stirred. She was beautiful when she was angry after all.

No! Shut up! I'm still mad at her!

She slapped me across the face, and I could do nothing. She sat on my chest and had her knees on my elbows preventing me from reaching her. In fact, the only thing I could do was buck around like a teenager in the throes of passion for the first time.

Laying there with Braenoic wasn't as fun as I had imagined it.

I managed to gain enough momentum to swing a leg up and kick her in the back of her head. It disoriented her but didn't do much good.

"Zook, what's gotten into you?"

"That bastard! What are you doing with him?"

"Who, Brother Artemus? He's one of the Spiritual Collective's agents."

I snuffed.

"Agent, right. He's with the Occultists."

"Occultists? That seems unlikely." She shook her head. "How do you figure that?"

"I followed the trail and found him consorting with Occultists and helping with a sacrifice! What do you say to that?"

"Helping with a sacrifice? What are you talking about? Brother Artemus has been investigating the Occultists. He's been working on converting them back to the Collective. That's what he just reported to us. One of the groups may be ready to repent."

"No, I was there. Melda. She's dead! Those bastards slit her open and used her blood to bring forth an Outsider. Let me up and help me stop them!"

She looked me in the eyes for a long moment.

Now that's more like it. Shut. Up!

"Do you promise to be good? No more fighting? If you do, I'll let you up so we can discuss this like rational adults."

"I promise. I just want to stop the Outsiders and make everyone responsible pay for killing Fudnottin and Melda."

"Okay, I'm getting up now, but if you try anything, I'll have you locked up in the Collective dungeons."

She got off me and stood tall, then offered me her hand. I had no pride, so I took it and hauled myself up. I couldn't have tried anything funny even if I wanted to. She was that much stronger than me, and a scrawny little guy like me can't jerk around a tight package of muscle like that.

We stood, facing each other, breathing hard. Under different circumstances .

..

"Look, I don't know who that monk is, but I know what I saw. He was there when we found Nerni and Melda, and he watched while the Occultist priest sacrificed Melda."

"Human sacrifice is a crime punishable by death by both the City and the Spiritual Collective. Brother Artemus would never be involved with that."

"You don't believe me, then believe that they summoned an Outsider and, um, let it get free." No need to get into the specifics of why the Outsider wasn't contained. But I'd had to do it to save Nerni, right?

"An Outsider, you say? What kind?"

"I'm not really up on my Outsider zoology, but it wasn't like any we saw before. Its body was made of bloody steam and basically shaped like a human, and it ate organs to use for its own."

"That's not good." She pondered that for a moment while I looked around the room. Artemus was long gone.

Now that I had time to stop and think, I realized that something was familiar about Artemus. Where had I seen him before?

"Okay, Zook. I'm not sure if I believe you, but if there is an Outsider roaming free, we can't take a chance. I'm going to gather some of my Paladins and you can take us to this Outsider. We have to stop it before it gets loose in the city."

"Fine, first things first, but Artemus isn't off the hook. Not by a long shot." He wasn't. I'd have my reckoning with that monk. "Oh yeah, and along the way, you can explain yourself--why didn't you show up this morning?"

She wouldn't look at me as she gathered her things.

I followed her out into the hall and down to her quarters.

"Braenoic." I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her around to face me. My anger faded when I saw the tears in her eyes. "Tell me."

"I went to Bishop Uthul first thing this morning and he told me about Brother Artemus's mission. Uthul knew about Fudnottin's murder already because Brother Artemus had been investigating the Occultists. He couldn't stop them from killing Fudnottin in time, but he had convinced them to not kill anyone else. Since Artemus had everything under control, Uthul ordered me to stay out of the way. He didn't want to jeopardize Brother Artemus's mission."

"How could you believe him?"

"Don't you get it? He's a Bishop. I have to follow his orders. Besides, why would I have any reason to doubt him?"

"It doesn't sound like you really believe that."

She gave me a dirty look.

"Something must have gone wrong with Artemus's mission. That's the only explanation. But someone died, and I didn't do anything about it. Who was it? Melda, you said?"

"Melda was Nerni's mother."

"That's right, I remember you telling me."

"Look, I'm even more guilty. I'm the one who brought Melda into all this, and I'm the one who didn't do anything for a whole day, but that's all behind us. All we can do now is fix what we can and get the people responsible. And that means stopping the Outsider and questioning Artemus."

I found myself wrapped in her arms, a shared mixture of sorrow and self-disappointment. Still, being in her arms brought back the forbidden emotions with more force. Before I did anything stupid, I broke away.

"Get your things and your people. We need to ride."

I want to say that we rode like the wind, but that's such an overused cliché that I can't bring myself to do it. Let's just say we rode like a farmer rushing to save his daughter's virtue from the boy down at the mill on Harvest Festival night.

The sewer entrance looked undisturbed, which meant that the Outsider was either still inside or else it has gone out through one of the myriad of other doors that connected the surface to the underworld. Okay, sewers. Maybe I was being a little melodramatic, but the gravity of the situation warranted it.

I have a good sense of direction; once I've been someplace, I can generally find my way back there. I led the squad of six Paladins into the smelly underbelly of the city. Either humans and dwarves couldn't smell as well as gnomes, or else they had some divine power that protected them from bad odors. Either way, they didn't seem to have the trouble I'd had my first time down here. My nose hadn't recovered. I was numb to the smell.

As we neared the Occultists' lair, the squad grew fidgety.

"We can sense the Outsider's power," Braenoic explained. "And these corpses don't help much, either."

They were good soldiers and kept themselves together and focused as we crept downward.

The lack of noise worried me. A big Outsider like that should be causing a ruckus. I didn't think they rested, since they aren't really beings of flesh--despite their diet. This meant that the Outsider had probably moved on. Still, we had to be thorough, and I wanted Braenoic to see the scene of the crime. She wouldn't be able to deny the evidence if she saw it herself.

When we arrived, the Outsider was nowhere to be found. The coals of the fire were dark and cold, and the blood had congealed and started turning brown and hard. I stood back and let the squad survey the scene. When they finished poking, prodding, and praying, we reconvened at the top of the pit.

"Well, Zook, it looks like you were right about the sacrifice, but that doesn't mean that Brother Artemus was here when it happened."

"I saw him here, and the victim was still alive at that point. He could have done something, but didn't. Besides, if he hadn't been here, how did I recognize him?" How indeed? The fact that I couldn't place his face nagged me. "And why did he run from me when I came in?"

"Because you burst through the door like a rampaging beast and jumped on him."

"Oh yeah, there is that. But still, he knew me and was scared that I'd tell the truth about what happened here."

"Well, we'll have to deal with that later. Right now we need to focus on the Outsider. There's only one way out of this cave, so we know which way it started out. I should be able to track it down, but pray that it hasn't left the sewers."

Tracking the thing proved to be an easy task. We just followed the trail of blood and mutilated frogling bodies. I felt sorry for the little guys. They hadn't done anything to deserve such a horrible death. They were just doing their job. I couldn't help but feel partly responsible, and that guilt added to the already enormous load I

shouldered. At one point I had to sit down and take deep breaths--which wasn't really much comfort and actually made me feel worse since it brought up the nausea.

"Hold steady, Zook. We can't do anything about them." Braenoic. Always the rock. "The only thing we can do is avenge them and prevent the Outsider from killing more."

"I know. It's just that too much has happened the past couple of days. But don't worry, I'll make it." With a sigh, I dragged myself to my feet once again.

The trail of death led deeper into the sewers, and I stopped counting frogling bodies--there were just too many to think about. There were so many mangled corpses that my mind went numb. At least the Outsider hadn't gone topside. The death toll would have been much higher on the surface of the city.

As soon as I thought that, I felt even worse about the froglings. I couldn't believe I felt "glad" about their deaths, even if it was the lesser of two evils.

At long last, we cornered the Outsider in an open area that might have been a town square. Now the square was filled with what I told myself was water. It's easier that way. Believe me.

To be honest, the fight wasn't all that spectacular. It wasn't my fight. I was just the guide. There wasn't anything I could have done against the creature even if I had tried. And the Paladins could heal themselves and each other, so my potions were unnecessary. I sat back from the safety of a dry perch and watched the battle. I was as useless as I felt.

The Outsider had continued to amass body parts, and when we found it, it had become a quivering mass of flesh, bone, and semi-intact organs. It had lost its original shape and could hardly move around. The Paladins surrounded it with their two-handed swords and hammers, all the rage amongst the knightly set these days, I supposed. No one wanted to look weak carrying a shield, after all.

The Paladins fought very efficiently. Working in pairs, one would attack and the other would hang back and heal the fighter with divine spells, and then they would swap. That kept three attackers on the Outsider at all times, and it couldn't follow the threats fast enough in its current state. Slowly but surely, they hacked it apart, littering the pool with gobs of flesh and gore.

The only real excitement came toward the end when they hacked off its head. That appeared to be its breaking point because it emerged from the pile of animated flesh in a puff of steam. Once the spirit left, the body parts all fell apart and splattered into the pool with a wet sploosh.

Before the steamy creature could dissipate and escape, Braenoic called upon her god to open a portal back to the Outside. I didn't catch the details, and even if I had, I doubt I could have gotten the spell to work since the gods clearly didn't favor me, but it was a neat trick to watch. I suppose I should have been more impressed, but I was too tired. I had seen too many bizarre things recently. Above all, I just wanted to get the hell out of the sewer.

The Paladins didn't seem the celebratory type. They checked each other out for injuries, gave hearty salutes, and that was the end of it. Fine by me. I was not in the mood for a celebration, either.

We returned to the surface to find the sun setting. Braenoic sent her Paladins home, and then we rode the short distance to Nerni's to check on things.

Gunder had helped himself to most of the food in the kitchen, but despite his repast, he looked glad to see me.

"There you are. There is no beer! And no one came for Gunder to bash their heads, so Gunder is very bored." Bored barbarians weren't so good to have around the house, so I paid him up and gave him my thanks. I found out where he usually lived and drank so I could find him in case I ever needed a good tracker again. He promised to let me know the next time they had a party, which, no doubt, wouldn't be too far in the future.

Nerni had rested and she looked better now. I didn't know what to say to her, so I stood there like an idiot. Braenoic introduced herself and comforted my friend who had suffered so much. As they spoke, they sat at the kitchen table, much the way Nerni and I had the day before. I didn't know what else to do, so I sat down next to Nerni. I wanted to be close and comfort her, but I still couldn't look her in the eyes. Then, as I pondered the knots in the wooden table, Nerni put her arm around me.

"Zook. You did everything you could. It wasn't your fault. Please be strong, I need you."

"Don't you get it?" I finally turned to look and saw that she held no blame in her eyes. Still . . . "It's all my fault. I'm responsible for bringing Melda into it and getting her killed."

"What? You selfish little prick! I'm the one who suffered the loss and you're the one sitting there feeling all depressed instead of helping me out. Look mister," she jabbed her finger in my chest. Hard. But she still didn't have blame in her eyes. "The only guilty people are the ones who got eaten by that thing down there. They get all of the blame." She poked me again when she said the word "all". "I'm just sorry that monk got away."

I am an idiot sometimes. She was absolutely right. The Occultists and that monk were the guilty ones. Yeah, certainly I'd made mistakes, but they weren't the cause of all the death and suffering.

You know those moments when someone says something that crystallizes your thinking to perfect clarity? I'd been so wrapped up in the tragedy and pain and my guilt that I hadn't been able to wrap my head around the issue. Now, with that one sentence, Nerni crystallized my jumbled thoughts to absolute focus.

"The monk," I said. "He is the key to all this."

"What do you mean?" asked Braenoic.

"This whole situation has bothered me from the beginning. It just hasn't felt right. At first I thought it might have been one of the other clockwork inventors trying to steal the prototype for profit, but that didn't track properly. The clockwork community is tight. They all go drinking together and give each other support against the protestors and vandals. It's just too out of character for one of them to have done it. Then I thought it was the Labor Guild, but my, uh, contact there convinced me that they hadn't been involved. They just capitalized on the aftermath of the murder to further their little intimidation schemes. And, of course, we found out that the Outsiders were involved. Maybe it was a mage, but Seebert says they don't deal with

Outsiders, and besides, they aren't exactly shy after they've attacked. That suggests that it was the Occultists, but why would they be involved with the other inventors or the Labor Guild?"

"Why?"

I was on a roll, so I didn't notice who answered my rhetorical question.

"I'll tell you why: they wouldn't. Those groups would have nothing to do with one another. And what's more, the Occultists would have no reason to kill Fudnottin. Right, Nerni? He wasn't into any shady dealings, was he?"

"No. Of course not."

"See. So maybe they picked him randomly as a target. Okay, but why go through the effort to make it look like his prototype killed him? They wouldn't care or even know about it. And why would they come back for Nerni and her evil mother if it was random?"

"My what mother?"

Oops, that's what I get for thinking out loud.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . I mean, well, you may not have noticed this, but Melda didn't like me much and we never really got along. That's just my pet name for her." I resorted to the cuddly kitten eyes look. It got a smile. Whew.

"It's okay. I'll tell you her pet name for you one of these days." Nerni shot me a wicked grin. "Go on, I didn't mean to distract you."

"Right, right. Where was I? Oh yeah, there would be no reason for the Occultists to focus on your family, unless there was some specific reason for them to focus their attention on you."

"Zook Terpin," Braenoic had that tone, "I think you've figured something out and are deliberately withholding it to increase the suspense. Stop being annoying. Out with it."

"No really, I'm on a roll here. I'm thinking out loud and putting it all together as I go, so bear with me. Because here's the good part. The monk, Artemus, is the connection. I knew I'd seen him before today."

"He did seem kind of familiar. Where did you see him?" said Nerni.

"You've been out drinking with the boys, right? Artemus is one of the regulars at the local pub. I'd only been there a few times, so it didn't click into place until just now. Fudnottin bragged about your prototype at the pub recently, and Artemus was there. A short time later, the Occultists that he had been in contact with come and kill Fudnottin and make it look like the prototype did it. And it would have worked, too. If Fud hadn't drained the hydraulic fluid, Nerni never would have suspected murder. Then later the Occultists come back and take Nerni and her mother." At this point, I was standing, trying to loom over Braenoic, though I was a bit too short to loom effectively. "And you said that Hierophant High Hat ordered you to stop investigating this case." I crossed my arms and rocked back on my heels, proud of my conclusion. "So the real question is, why did the Spiritual Collective want Fudnottin and Nerni dead?"

Silence.

"No, that can't be right." Braenoic was the first to speak.

Nerni sat there stunned, and to be honest, I was stunned too. I never really trusted the Collective, but I didn't suspect them in any conspiracy or wrongdoings. But it was the only conclusion that made sense.

"No other theory fits the evidence. Maybe the Occultists corrupted Artemus, and your boss tried to cover it up. Or maybe he was involved himself?"

"But why would someone in the Spiritual Collective want to kill Nerni and her husband? Especially over a clockwork. There's no reason."

"Well," said Nerni, timid at first, "we have gotten protest letters from the congregation before." Her voice got stronger and more confident as she spoke. "And like I told Zook, this clockwork is a new level of complexity. It can be programmed for many tasks, and when it's done, it should be able to simulate a live person."

"Would Fudnottin have talked about that at the bar?" I thought I knew where it was going. The Collective doesn't like artificial life--they claimed soulless automatons were an affront to the gods and should be outlawed. They'd managed to drive the necromancers underground since death magic tended to get the populace riled up, but they'd had less luck with the elementalists and their golems. If they thought the clockworks were heading into that same category, they might take extreme actions to prevent it. In fact, it wasn't such a far step for them since they were generally suspicious of technology.

"You know Fud. Once we had some evidence that it would work, it would have been impossible to prevent him from talking about it to his buddies."

"Yeah," I nodded, "that sounds about right for him."

"This is a serious accusation," said Braenoic. "I can't very well go into the Collective and start accusing the officials of collaborating with Occultists to plan and carry out a murder. Not without definitive evidence, at any rate."

"So you believe it?" I wanted to know where she stood.

"I'm not sure, but I will admit there is some evidence."

"Well, what will it take to convince you? They have to pay the price for their actions Brae. You know that, even if they are your colleagues."

"I need to talk to Brother Artemus."

"He'll never talk, even if we can find him."

"Then we'll talk to Bishop Uthul. He should know how to contact Brother Artemus. Look, it's too late to go now, so we'll meet first thing in the morning. You two come to the Collective compound and we'll go see Bishop Uthul together."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"I don't like the sound of that. You aren't going to ditch me again, are you?"

"No, Zook, I promise. Something funny is going on, but I want to know what it is before I go bursting into the Bishop's chambers with accusations. I'm not you, you know."

"Some situations call for a good burst-in. It's my trademark, so there you go. And I'm not afraid to do it again."

"I know. That's why I want you to come get me first."

"Okay, then it's a plan. We'll meet you at your quarters just after breakfast."

She left us, and I had a feeling she wasn't as convinced about it all as we were. Nerni, at least, seemed to agree with my assessment of the evidence. But what would we do? How could we bring Collective officials to justice and make them produce Artemus? Even if he was on the compound, we wouldn't be able to touch him without Braenoic's help.

"Zook?" Nerni was quiet again, but not in a timid way. Now she sounded determined. "Now that your friend is gone, I think I know how to find the monk."

"Oh?" Things had taken a turn for the interesting. "Do tell."

"Well, if he's a regular at the pub, Max would know where he lives. I think Max has carried just about every one of those boys home at some time or another, and Max would tell me."

"Let's go, then. I don't want to leave this in the hands of the Collective. I'm just not in a trusting mood right now."

We cleaned up and gathered ourselves together. Gunder had retrieved my cane, so I wiped off the worst of the sewer slime, and then we walked over to the pub.

If we'd been lucky, Artemus would have been there, waiting to be picked up, but we weren't, and he wasn't. Since Max didn't trust me, I waited outside while Nerni got us the information we needed. I didn't like leaving her in there alone, but if Max saw her with me, he might not have helped. So there I stood, ears tuned to the front door, listening for any sounds of trouble.

While I waited, I fidgeted with my cane. I knew it well after all these years and could flip it around like a juggler. I could feel exactly where it would balance and how it would rotate in the air. It helped pass the time and keep my mind off of what might go wrong.

Like having a bag slipped over my head and getting punched in the gut, for instance.

The Labor Guild thugs must have followed me. I was so distracted that I didn't see them coming or even think that they might have been there. This time, they didn't wait to give me a chance to react; they clocked me on the back of the head with something heavy and solid.

I wasn't unconscious, but just barely. My vision was dark, but the darkness wasn't total. Spots of light flashed here and there, taunting me, tempting me to believe that I could see.

I tried to move, but my arms and legs hung limp and useless, like . . . well, I won't finish that thought.

I tried to speak, but the words, which formed so coherently in my brain, came out as slurred groans. The thugs told me to shut up and whacked my head again. The pain was so intense that I blacked out, but I don't think for very long, because when I came to my senses, I was still being dragged across cobblestones. There wasn't anything I could do, so I just enjoyed the ride.

We finally reached a wooden staircase, which they dragged me up, and then they hauled me into a room with a splintery floor and the odor of sawdust. I knew the floor was splintery because my face was pressed into it after having been thrown down like a rag doll. I considered taking a nap, but the sawdust got in my nose and made me sneeze.

"Someone help him up, and take that bag off him."

I didn't recognize the voice, but I did recognize the familiar hands that had brought me here as they pulled me up by the shoulders and dumped me on a makeshift chair that consisted of a wooden crate.

They pulled the hood off my head and I got my first glimpse of the room. Judging by all the crates stacked around, I appeared to be in a warehouse of some sort. I sat in the center of the clear space on my crate and tried to memorize the face of every man in the room, but there were too many. They all watched one man, so I only really needed to remember his face.

He stood in front of me, leaning up against a stack of crates, smoking a pipe as if he were in a library perusing the latest literary offerings. The man was tall and had a dark complexion. His thick black hair reached his shoulders, giving him a desert nomad look. His clothing accentuated the look.

A purple shirt made of silk hung open at his bare neck and tucked into a pair of black leather trousers. Low, black leather boots completed the outfit, well, except for the gold finger- and earrings. I don't normally check out other men, but I had to admire a fellow fashion artist.

"If I'd known I was coming, I would have dressed up. Nicholas de Grenefeld, I presume?"

"That's right. And I already know who you are. You're the man who beat one of my people nearly to death last night. We don't allow others to attack us and get away with it. It is not our style."

"So you want to lodge a complaint with the Watchmen? Good, let's go there right now and do it together."

"Hmmm, no, I think I'd rather deal with it myself."

Yeah, that never really worked, but it was always fun to try.

"I tell you what, Nick." I hoped that pissed him off, because I was in no mood for playing games. I leaned back on the crate and kicked my feet out in front of me. "I'm tired, I'm sore, and I'm stinky. Right now I want to go home, bathe, and go to sleep, but I have to go apprehend a murderer. So I don't have time to chat. Why don't we continue this conversation later?"

"No, Mr. Terpin. I have a problem with you, and I intend to solve it tonight. And I'm not really concerned by your desires, though I agree that you need to bathe. You gnomes are a dirty lot, but I suppose it comes from your subterranean heritage."

A bigot. Great.

"I don't have the energy for games, so are you going to get to a point some day?" He started to talk again, but I cut him off. "Let me guess, gnomes and alchemists are evil, a threat to your way of life, everything you hold dear, and the fabric of reality. I've heard it all before, so get in the queue and wait with everyone else. No, you know, I think I can take care of everything. I have a proposal."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, and what would that be?"

You see? That's what I like about dealing with fellow businessmen. The other fanatics who sent me death threats wouldn't listen to anything I said. But de Grenefeld would listen, if I presented an opportunity for money.

"You don't like me because I help the clockwork makers, and the clockwork makers put your guys out of work. Right?"

"Quite so, but you aren't convincing me to be kind to you."

"No, no, hear me out." I waved him to silence. "I'm not your enemy, I'm your best friend."

"Oh, indeed?"

He and his thugs had a good laugh at that. Now would have been the perfect time to make my break for freedom, but I had a better plan.

"Oh yeah. Your problem is that the clockworks can do more work than your men because they are stronger and don't get tired so fast. But I'm an alchemist. I can get you potions that will give you the edge over the clockworks."

That stopped his laughing.

"Really? And why would we trust you enough to drink a potion you made? It could be poison. You are one of them, after all."

One of them? I bit my tongue and went on.

"Hey," I used my biggest smile on him, "I'm no technologist. Alchemy is half magic anyway. Besides, I'm a fellow businessman." That didn't seem to do it. "I'd have to charge you for the potions, of course, so if I killed you, I'd be killing my revenue. We both stand to win."

I could see the gears turning in his mind as he stood there.

"That is an intriguing proposal. Assuming you can make a potion like you describe, how much would it cost?"

"I can make potions that last all day long, and will keep your men from getting tired, while at the same time doubling their strength. Imagine it, the strength

of a clockwork with the brain of a man. You'd put the clockwork makers out of business." Probably not, but honest opinions had no place in a business negotiation.

"But the price . . ."

"Well, I would have to cover my costs, and I typically charge a hundred percent profit because I make the best potions."

"Ho! One hundred percent? I don't think so. Twenty-five is plenty."

"Twenty-five! That's not worth my time. Fifty or I walk out of here."

"Remember how you got to be here." Oh yeah, right. "I suppose I could go as high as thirty."

"Thirty-five at least, but that would require a contract for exclusivity for a year."

"Six months."

"Only if I get a guaranteed six-month extension pending satisfactory completion of the first period."

He thought about it some more and then extended his hand.

"Deal. I'll have my people draw up the papers while we wait."

"Yes, about that . . ."

"Hmm, we have a deal now, so it would not do to teach you a lesson now, would it? But my man deserves justice."

"Thirty-five percent is punishment enough."

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. I had to try.

"Well," I continued, "hear my side before you make your decision. Your man stuck a bloody dagger in my door with a death threat. No big deal, but his timing was bad to say the least. My friend had been murdered, my apprentice had been beaten and left for dead, and my other friend and her mother had been kidnapped. Leaving that note was like admitting to the crime. What was I supposed to do? What would you have done?"

He stared me down and I gave first in order to let him feel big and strong. It wasn't hard to play the pitiful weakling as a gnome. Humans were all too ready to believe it.

"True, the timing was unfortunate, but still, that wasn't worth a beating."

"I did leave him a healing potion, you know."

"Rightly so, but what can you do for him to apologize?"

"How about a set of potions on the house? Something to help him recover, and maybe something to help him with the ladies." Like soap, perhaps. "I did notice he was home alone . . ."

"I'll have to talk to Portnoy, but I think that would be reasonable, given the misunderstandings."

I stood up and shook his hand. I was done. Time to get back before Nerni missed me.

"Good. I'm gonna go and apprehend this murderer, if that's okay? Send someone over tomorrow after lunch and I'll sign the contract and give him the gifts for Portnoy. Good night."

He tried to convince me to stay long enough to sign, but I wasn't about to sign a six-month contract when I was distracted.

I hurried back to the pub so Nerni wouldn't worry. My head ached from the beatings, and fresh pain shot through it every time my foot landed, but at least I made it in one piece. My cane lay where I'd dropped it. At last, a bit of good luck.

I worried about Nerni, though. Had she come out already and something else happened to her, or was she still in there? I decided to go in to check, but before I could enter, she strode through the front door. I hurried over to her and took her arm to lead her out of the light and off the street.

"What took so long?"

"Everyone wanted to comfort me and offer me their regrets about Fud. It was quite cute actually--they really loved the old bastard." But she smiled when she talked about him. "Are you okay? You look tired."

"I'm just peachy. So do tell, what did you discover? Do you know where to find Artemus?" The longer we waited, the more time he had to run and hide. I didn't expect we would see the corrupt monk again, but that was no reason not to try.

"I did. Max has had to take him home several times. He apparently lives at the compound, but when he's drunk, he goes to his sister's place in Stonegate."

"Stonegate, eh?" That district lay just north of here, which would explain why he came to this pub. "I hope the sister isn't home. It could get awkward when we confront him."

"Maybe we can lure him out or wait 'til he leaves, and then get him?"

"Good plan. We'll want to hide and watch anyway to make sure he's there."

This night was colder than the previous one, but I wasn't alone, so it didn't seem as bad. I let Nerni lead the way, since she knew this area better than I did, but I made her stick to the shadows and stop whenever other folks crossed our path. Not many other pedestrians walked the streets at that time of night with such cool weather, so we made good time.

Stonegate is named for the single large gate that links it to the rest of the town. Otherwise, a twenty-foot tall, ancient stone wall seals it off. Legend has it that it was once inhabited by the vastly wealthy, who walled it off and set guards at the gate to keep out the undesirables. But in the intervening years, the area has declined, and now there are no guards. Also the present inhabitants are the very undesirables the rich folks tried to avoid. Time has such a wonderful sense of irony, which is why I'm glad I'm a gnome--we tend to have long lives, except when our natural curiosity gets us killed early. I don't think I could stand being a human or orc and only living eighty years at best; they miss so much good stuff!

Inside the walls, the atmosphere seemed palpably different. There was no wind, for one thing. Stonegate wasn't that big, and the wall blocked the wind effectively. It was nice from a standpoint of not being cold, but it meant that the smells lingered far longer than they should have. I smelled stale cooking, dirty laundry, and decay--in that order. I didn't know what they cooked around there, and frankly, I didn't want to. It must have been quite pungent to get past my numbed smell buds, or else the effect of the sewers had worn off somewhat. Maybe I would have been better off if it hadn't.

Stonegate was home to humans for the most part, but there was one section of urbanized orcs as well. We didn't look like either, though we might have passed for human children if nobody looked too closely or if they drank a keg of ale first. Better to keep to the shadows.

We picked our way amongst the broken wooden crates and other detritus that lined the shadowy streets until at last we reached Artemus's hideout. His sister's home was as shabby as the rest of the places here. Once, long ago, it must have been a beautiful estate. I could still make out the original building: two stories tall and wide enough to house a squad or two of soldiers, but only one family had probably lived there. Well, one family and a host of servants.

Now, the once beautiful yard had been trampled. The garden beds had become latrines, and most of the available land now supported shacks built from random bits of wood, metal, and miscellaneous. The cries of children and hookers sounded from around the estate--the original inhabitants must be rolling in their graves, which had probably been built over as well.

We weaved our way through the random paths between shacks and approached the main house. Artemus's sister must have done something right to secure a spot inside. According to Max, she had three rooms on the second floor all to herself, and probably to her husband and children as well. I didn't know much about her, which was probably a good thing, since I was about to confront her brother for murdering a friend, letting Occultists kill a friend's mother, and allowing an Outsider to slaughter countless froglings. No, I didn't want to know if he had any cute little nieces and nephews lurking about.

It would have been easier if he had been on the first floor, but nothing in life is easy. We crept up to the front door and had to stop and hide as two humans walked out. They didn't see us, but they sat on the front stoop and pulled out pipes. One brought out a packet of what I assumed was tobacco, and the other brought forth a

smoldering stick to light the pipes. They didn't look like they were going anywhere for a while. Crap.

The smokers were bad news. I hadn't been in this district in a while, but I suspected that many of the folks had early morning jobs, which meant that we had to be out of here well before dawn. I had no way of knowing how late these guys would be up, so my only choices were to sneak around them or give up and try to track Artemus when he left in the morning. I decided that sneaking in would be easier than spotting a human trying not to be noticed in this crowd.

I whispered to Nerni to wait in the shadows under the monk's window. Or at least what we guessed was his window. I would go in and try to extract him as quietly as possible. I hoped he was a sound sleeper.

She left and slunk around the left side of the building. Once she was safely out of sight, I did my best impression of a mouse and crept along the front porch, behind the smokers. Judging by the smell, the tobacco was of the same quality as the construction, but hey, when you don't have much, you have lower expectations. They seemed to be having a grand old time chatting it up and smoking together, and that's what it's all about in my book.

I wasn't sure how I would get through the small slot behind them without making any noise, and with them so close, there wasn't much chance they wouldn't hear me. Then as I waited, holding my breath, the guy with the tobacco told a raunchy joke involving an elf maiden, a bull troll, and a turtle, and in the ensuing howls of laughter, I made my move. I pounced like a cat--silent and swift--through the open front door into whatever lay in wait inside the foyer.

What do you know? It was empty. Finally, a lucky break.

"Well, Thomas, time for me to hit the sack. Got a early job tomorrow."

Damn. The smokers were finished and heading back inside. The foyer was large and open, with a worn-out stone staircase circling up the curved back wall. I glanced around, looking for a hiding spot, but there weren't many choices. Moonlight shone through the broken window in the ceiling and showed me dirt and leaves that covered the ground and would likely make noise if I walked across them. I'd never make it up the stairs in time. My only options were to hide in whatever shadows I could find and hope they didn't see me, or else to pick a door at random.

The nearest door it was.

I was just to the left of the front doors and out of sight of the porch, but I couldn't risk cutting across. That meant a door ten paces away on the left wall. I prayed for luck that it wouldn't be locked and made my silent dash. I was too slow.

The men closed the front door with a quiet bump, but it was enough to let me know I was in trouble. The only thing I could do was spin and dive into a roll that left me tucked in the corner between the floor and wall, my head behind a weather-beaten wooden box. It wasn't much cover, and I had made some noise when I dove.

"Hey, what was that?"

"Goddamned rats! Must be another cave-in to the sewers, I can smell it."

"Quiet down, you'll wake everyone up."

I couldn't see what they were doing, but one of the men grunted and must have thrown something, because I felt a rock or some small object thud into my leg.

"Hah, I think I got it!"

"You're such an idiot. You'll never get a rat. They're too fast for you. We need more cats around here. Get rid of the filthy vermin."

I kept silent and didn't move, didn't even breathe.

"Ah, forget it. You can stay here if you want, but I'm going to bed."

"Damn rats."

I heard two sets of footsteps walk off in different directions.

Whew. I was safe.

I gave them a few minutes to get all tucked in bed before I rolled out from the wall. Silent as a cat, I made my way up the stairs and found the door that Max had described to Nerni. It had no lock or latch, so I gently pushed it inward, hoping it wouldn't squeak. It didn't, but I had to give it a good shove to get it to open more than a few inches. When I shoved, it hit something and made a distinct bump. I froze and listened for any sounds of movement. I stayed there, frozen with one hand out on the door, eyes closed to give my full attention to my ears for what seemed an hour, but no noises reached me, so I continued on.

Inside, the main room held a crude stove, lopsided wooden table, and a few chairs. I think it may have been a library at one time, or perhaps a sitting room. Someone had converted the old fireplace into a crude stove that looked ugly but effective. Behind the door stood a battered bookcase made from cedar, judging by smell. I had to lean in close to be sure, though--my nose still wasn't up to snuff. The shelves were crammed full of kitchenware and a random assortment of home items, so I had been lucky that no pots or plates fell down when I bumped it. The occupants had crammed their belongings into every corner, hung things from the ceiling, and packed junk wherever they could. That explained why I couldn't open the door without hitting the bookcase. Once I had satisfied my curiosity, I got back to work.

Two doors led out of the room. I assumed Artemus slept behind one and his sister and her family lived behind the other. But which was which? The more doors I opened, the more chance I had of getting caught, and that would be a Very Bad Thing. The squatters here didn't seem like the kind to take trespassing lightly--also they might not like the fact that I could pin an Outsider massacre on Artemus.

I thought about the layout of the house and how I had turned and walked to get here. The main room was a rectangle, with the fireplace on the wall with a window, which lay to my right. Straight ahead across the room, the two doors faced me from the same wall. Well, his sister probably wanted the right-hand room which would be a corner room with more windows, and that meant he would be on the left. On the other hand, the corner room would be small, and the left room might be larger.

I went with my gut instinct and picked the left room. I was pretty good at moving silently, what with all this recent practice, and made little noise as I went. You have to go slow though, in order to be quiet, or at least I do. I suppose an elf might have been able to bound noiselessly through this whole slum, but he would have gotten here and begged for money or gear, thus defeating the purpose. Well now, that's not really fair. A good number of them would have stolen something and left without a sound.

I pressed my ear against the door ever so lightly and listened. I couldn't hear anything, though, so I tapped my foot on the door to make a slight noise. Sure enough, that did it. I heard people rustle around for a moment and then a woman began to snore. Wrong room. That'll teach me to trust my gut instinct.

I went to the other door and listened. No sounds. Either no one was home or else they were a quiet sleeper. I thought about making a little noise again, but why press my luck. If Artemus was in there, he was in there. If he wasn't, then no harm going in.

This door was latched, so I had to twist the handle slowly around, cringing each time a ratchet or bolt or whatever clicked into place. I breathed a sigh of relief when the latch popped and the door opened before me.

In the moonlight that shone through the window, I could see my prey. The room was colorless in the dim light, all shades of bluish gray from the moon's light. The light came in through both windows, one on the far side of the room and the other on the right hand wall. Papers littered the floor, and the walls showed cracking plaster. Dust filtered down through the moonlight from the ceiling, which had been ripped apart for wood--probably for a new structure in the courtyard below.

In the corner under the two unshuttered windows, Artemus lay sleeping on a ragged pallet with little stuffing.

Now that I was here, I wasn't sure how best to proceed. I wanted to get him out of Stonegate and into someplace secluded so we could have a little talk. But if he was awake, he could cry for help, and the folks who would come would all be on his side. On the other hand, if he wasn't awake, there was no possibility for Nerni and I to carry him out unnoticed--if indeed, we could carry him at all. So I stood there pondering my next move, staring at him.

Artemus must be one of those partially psychic people who can sense when they're being watched, because as I stood there, his eyes fluttered open and fixated on me. It was a small room, so there was no chance he hadn't seen me. Yep, he saw me. He sat up and spoke.

"Hey!"

I had to shut him up fast, so I dropped my cane and dove at him, knocking the air out of his lungs as I hit. I was aware of how much noise we made, but there was no other choice. We fought and tumbled, banging into the wall, punching, kicking, and grappling in the darkness. For a scrawny monk, he was surprisingly strong.

I managed to keep my shoulder pressed in his face so he couldn't cry out again as we fought, but it wasn't enough. Someone banged on the wall from his sister's room.

"Quiet down, Arty." A woman's voice. His sister? "Some of us have to sleep."

We stopped fighting. I guess he didn't want to get into more trouble with his sister. He was quick, though. During the lull in the action, he rolled me over, drew up to get out of my bear hug, and punched me in the face. I saw a flash of light and tasted the metallic tang of blood. He hit me again and again, but he didn't have any style, didn't know what he was doing. He was like an animal or a child--scrabbling and flailing about. That first punch had been a lucky shot, but his ferocity made up for his lack of talent. Unfortunately for me, my talent wasn't enough to make up for my lack of size, so the best I could do was avoid as many blows as I could and roll with the rest.

"Arty, I told you not to bring your hookers back here anymore." It was a man's voice this time. "Don't make me come in there and throw you out again."

That stopped him and made him turn towards the wall to the adjacent room for an instant. It was all the time I needed.

I reached in my belt and grabbed one of the few remaining vials. I wanted the pepper beetle extract, but I didn't have time to hunt for just the right thing, and instead I came up with something a little less potent: Indigest-Aid. I didn't have time to get another bottle, so oh well, it would have to do.

I shoved the vial at his face as he turned back to look at me and stuffed it in his mouth. Then I grabbed the top of his head with one hand and placed my other hand on the bottom of his jaw to hold his mouth partially shut. If I pushed any harder or he struggled too much, the vial would break.

"Don't move, Arty."

He gagged on the vial and continued to struggle, but I didn't let him open his mouth. His hands scrapped at my own and at my face, fingernails digging painful lines in my flesh.

"I said don't move." I was whispering in his ear now, protecting my face by turning it towards his head. "That is a vial of acid. I'm an alchemist. I made it myself, and it is strong enough to eat through metal. Just think what it will do to your insides if I crush it."

He stopped struggling, but his jaw strained to open. I let off some of the pressure, but not enough so that he could open wide enough to spit out the vial.

"Good man. Now listen carefully, here's what we're going to do." I shifted around so that I was behind him, but still kept his head in a locked grip. "Nod once if you understand."

Nod.

My cane was close enough to reach with my foot, so I retrieved it and levered it into place so I could choke him if he got feisty.

"Good. Now you are going to slowly stand up, and I'm going to ride on your back. Okay?"

Nod.

"Then you're going to walk out of here, down the stairs and out the front door. And you aren't going to make any noise or try to bump me off, otherwise the next thing that will happen will be me crushing the vial. And we don't want that, do we?"

Nod.

"I didn't think so. Now don't worry, I don't want to hurt you. We just want to find out what happened, and we don't want to disturb the neighborhood. Okay, so take it easy and we'll all be just fine."

He hesitated an instant, and then nodded. I hoped he believed me, even though I had exaggerated a bit on that part about the not wanting to hurt him. Maybe he figured he would have a better chance of getting away later, but hey, as long as he went along with it, we would be fine. I wasn't about to slack my grip, however.

He was a good boy, and didn't cause any trouble on the way out, but he was not as smooth a ride as Shira. I reined him around the corner of the building by giving his head a little twist and collected Nerni, who looked extra pale and nervous in the moonlight. She shot us a sideways glance and raised her eyebrow.

"Don't ask." I whispered. "He'll do what we say, but I have to stay up here. So why don't you lead us back to your place."

Now that we were outside and away from low-hanging doorways, I scrambled up until I sat on his shoulders. To any casual and very drunk or partially blind observers, we looked like a man giving his son a piggy-back ride in the slums during the middle of the night with his daughter leading the way. A real family portrait. But lucky for us, not many people were out, and those that were didn't care.

We returned to the scene of the original crime and dumped Artemus on the bloodstained floor where Nerni found Fudnottin. The morticians had retrieved Melda's body while I was in the sewers with Brae. I was glad. Evil though she was,

Melda deserved a nice burial, and this scum shouldn't have the chance to gloat over his handiwork.

Nerni tied his hands and feet, and then, when she was done, I passed her the cane and then extracted the bottle of Indigest-Aid--I made a big show about being careful, since I wanted to keep him scared--and climbed off my new favorite pony. Artemus coughed and spat at me, but Nerni had tied him well, so he couldn't get up.

"You bastards! Is that really acid?"

"Want me to pour some on your leg?" I bluff well, and started pulling at the stopper.

"No! No. Fine, I believe you. But you better let me go now, or you'll be in even bigger trouble. I have friends. Powerful allies in the Collective."

"Oh, you won't be going anywhere until you tell us everything. Starting with why you had the Occultists kill Fudnottin."

"Why, so you can have the Watchmen or whomever you have hidden here listen to my confession and come arrest me?"

Hmm, that would have been a good idea.

"No, like I said, we want to know why. Tell us and we'll let you go."

"Zook?" Nerni pulled at my arm.

"I know you want to kill him, but if he's dead, we won't know why, and then we won't be able to stop them from trying again, and again, and again."

Now that she was in her home turf, Nerni was mad. She grew more and more livid by the minute. Before long, I'd have to tie her up to keep her from killing Artemus.

"Give me the wrench and sit down. If he thinks we're going to kill him, he won't talk. So we have to let him go when he tells us." I turned back to the tied-up monk. "You are going to tell us, right?"

"Choke on a turkey gizzard, you runty little wart!" He was ranting now. "I won't say anything, and you won't kill me! Or hey, maybe I'll tell you everything and you won't be able to do anything about it. My allies will protect me, and then you'll be on our hit list too."

I was quiet when I spoke next.

"And what makes you so sure I won't kill you?"

That made him stop and glare at me.

"They know you were after me. Oh, remember your little outburst in the Bishop's chambers? Well, if anything happens to me, they'll come looking for you. They'll be able to sense it if you have my blood on your hands. You won't be able to escape punishment. So now, why don't you untie me like a good little runt and I'll be on my way."

He was so smug looking that I wanted to slap the smirk off his face with a sixteen-inch, rusty, iron spanner. But I had a better idea--if he thought he had us beat, maybe he would slip up and give us some evidence.

"Nerni, you know something, he's right. We can't kill him, and even if we make him talk, it won't do any good."

"What? You can't be serious, Zook."

"The Collective would protect him. You know how they are. In fact, his boss probably sent him out here to kill Fudnottin. He's just the errand boy."

"I won't let him get away with it, Zook. I won't."

I gave her a shrug. I wanted to wink and let her know that I had a plan, but it was more convincing this way.

"If you kill him, then you'll go to prison for the rest of your life or get executed. Is it worth it?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. That was a bad sign. I worried about Nerni before, but now that worry doubled.

"Well, I can't let you throw your life away, Nerni. I couldn't forgive myself."

I wanted to hug her so badly. She didn't look like she would take it well, though. Tears made her eyes glisten and magnified the redness from her pain. Her arms shivered with what I thought was grief. Then I noticed she clenched her fists so tight that her arms shook. I had to reassure her.

"Don't worry. Untie his legs."

"No! We can't let him go!"

"You'd better listen to your pal, little girl, or else the Collective will get you too." Artemus focused his deranged gaze on Nerni so hard that I might as well not have been in the room.

"Just untie his legs. Trust me." With my back to the monk, I grinned and gave her a wink. That stopped her. I didn't want him to catch on, even though he would have to be stupid to think I didn't have a plan. Before her face could give anything away, I gave her a hug and spun her away from the monk.

"Don't worry, Nerni. We'll tell Brae and she'll take care of him."

"Yes, tell your friend. She's a Paladin. They know their place."

I gave him a frown. I played it up as best I could. I didn't want him to think I had a plan. If only I had a good one. Nerni was no help now that she thought I was up to something. She blathered instead of protesting, so before she tipped him off, I sent her out of the room. Once she was gone, I pulled a pair of metal shears off the wall where they hung amongst the other tools of the trade. I didn't say anything as I showed them to my friend.

"Hey! Stop! What are you going to do with those? You can't kill me, you said so yourself!"

"Just because I'm not going to kill you doesn't mean that I won't do something unpleasant." Evil grin. Quiet snicker. Methodical walk.

"If you do anything, I'll tell my friends. They'll come get you."

"You know the truth and I know the truth. By all means, let's tell more people. We should expose what you did to as many people as possible." Dramatic pause. Knowing wink. "Wouldn't that be fun? Hmmm?"

"Stupid runt! My friends already know! Who do you think came up with the plan?"

"True. You don't seem like one to be able to do anything on your own. Why don't you run along to your master and tell him that we are on to you. We'll expose him and his little scheme for everyone to see."

"Oh, I'll tell him all right." Ding! There we go. "And then he'll send you to the pits to be interrogated for the rest of your pitiful life! Now untie me!"

"Sure thing. But first..."

I cut his clothes away and shredded them. It didn't take long and the monk didn't struggle much, not with the shears so close to his body. Then I cut his feet free, but I left his hands tied. I wanted him to suffer and to be on edge. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best I could come up with. If I had more time or weren't so tired, maybe I could do better. For now: get him mad and let him go. Then we follow and hope he leads us somewhere.

He protested, of course, but he couldn't threaten me any more than he already had. And frankly, he had no imagination, so I got bored with the threats and tuned him out.

Then I dragged him to the door and shoved him through with my boot.

"Go tell someone who cares."

I slammed the door and called to Nerni, hoping that we could follow the monk and find out who he worked for before he could mobilize his friends against us. I should have dumped water or oil on him so he'd leave a trail. Oh well.

Nerni had gathered our gear while I worked on the monk. Excellent. She was turning out to be pretty good in an adventure. I called for her to come over as I peered through the peephole in the front door. Watching the naked human scurry down the street towards the river kept me entertained, but I had to remember why I watched him. Towards the river. Good. He was probably heading back to the Collective compound.

"Let's go, Nerni, we don't want to lose him."

"It's too bad Gunder isn't here."

I gave her a look that said "What? You don't trust me?" She just rolled her eyes back, so I grabbed my cane, which she proffered, and ushered her out the door. The monk moved fast and my tracking skills weren't on par with our new barbarian friend's, so we hurried to keep up.

He took a pretty direct route, though he did hide in the shadows and peer behind himself a lot. I thought we did a good job of staying out of sight, but who knows. He could be leading us into a trap.

By this time of night, the late-night revelers had turned in and the early risers still slept. No one was on the street, and it was still dark, but still, our naked prey must be getting nervous.

He paused in front of the bridge, crouching behind a shrub, then dashed across. Nerni and I followed, ducking below the low wall that prevented mishandled carts and absentminded magi from falling in the water. It was just the right size for us.

We managed to avoid being seen out there in the open, and the chase continued. Actually it wasn't very exciting as far as chases go, but the tension was high. Well, for me at least. If he got away, he might sic his big bad friends on me, and that wouldn't be good. I mean, they did use an Outsider to kill Fud, after all. Or he might disappear forever and we'd never get revenge for Fud.

All of that ran through my mind when the monk finally ducked into a building outside the compound. A pub. Go figure. And this guy is what the Spiritual Collective considers to be one of the devout faithful? The Collective impressed me less and less each day.

Sneaking into a pub at this time of night would be hard enough, but add on that it was in Collective territory, and that the guy we chased was a member of the Collective, and that he felt comfortable enough to go in there naked and bound. Well, I didn't like the odds.

"Nerni, I think it's a trap. You should stay outside while I sneak in."

"But won't you need my help?"

"If it's a trap, I don't want you to get caught too." I gave her a puppy-dog smile, eyes and all. Man, I was losing control. I needed sleep soon. She was watching the pub, though, and didn't notice. Whew. "Besides, if I get in trouble, you have to go to Brae and Investigator Tillman and tell them what happened."

"Okay. If you aren't out in fifteen minutes, I'll go for help. Be careful, Zook."

"Don't worry. I don't want to die." I gave her a reassuring hug. "Now, there might be a back door, so if you don't see me, don't assume the worst. Hurry to get help, but don't assume the worst."

I slinked closer to the pub until I could crouch below the front window. The place was called 'The Gleaming Chalice', so I knew it catered to Collective-goers, but a pub is a pub. The dust on the window cast a haze over what I could see of the interior, and what I could see told me that it was a dive. I guess the proprietor had been optimistic when he came up with the name.

The ceiling displayed cracks longer than my arm, and the chandeliers were wrought iron with no fancy bits, like drip trays for the candle wax. That wasn't really an issue, though, since there weren't many candles to be seen.

I listened for any signs of life from within, but the place was as dead as the chandeliers.

Well, either the people were gone and the main room was empty, or else they waited out of sight to grab me as I entered. If that damn monk got away, we would be out of luck. I had to go in, but I expected the worst and braced myself for trouble. My cane in one hand and my last vial of pepper beetle gland extract in the other, I was as ready as I would ever be.

In true pub style, the front door was unlocked, even at this hour. A bad sign for me sneaking in, but I didn't have much choice.

I pushed the door open with my foot and walked forward. That's when someone grabbed my hand and pulled me in.

I didn't wait to see who had grabbed me. They had the advantage, and quite possibly there were more of them. Instead of pulling against the grabber, I rushed forward. I couldn't use the extract bottle, since my attacker held on tight to that hand, but I could swing my cane. I brought it around in a tight arc, but before it could connect, I rammed my shoulder into a stomach. In the dim light, I couldn't tell for sure, but I think it was the guy grabbing my arm.

We tumbled down to the wooden floor and added a few extra dents that would never get noticed. The guy with the grabby hands finally let go of my arm, so I jumped up and took a swing at his head. If I could take him out fast, then the odds wouldn't be as bad. Before I connected with Grabby, a heavy object smashed into my back. So much for evening the odds.

I rolled with the blow and dove to the floor once again. When I hit, the extract bottle jumped out of my hand and skittered across the floor. I watched it bounce across the uneven surface and hoped it wouldn't break. It managed to spin to a stop under a table, out of harm's way, but also out of reach. Not good, but better than nothing, I suppose.

I heard a yell behind me, so I rolled right, just in time to avoid catching a chair to the back of the head. The move left me on my back, staring straight up into the eyes of a shirtless human with an unkempt beard. He lifted the chair high above his head and gave me an unprotected target for my cane: his groin.

A few seconds later, the man rolled around on the floor crying, all attempts to kill me over for a while.

Grabby still wanted to play, and he seemed to know how to play a mean game of throw-the-chair-at-the-gnome. I ducked under the first, and then leapt to the right just in time to avoid the second. The third, however, was a stool that came faster, and it managed to connect with my chest. At least it missed my face, but it did send me sprawling.

I was in a daze, but the gods must have taken pity on me; I wound up on the ground with the bottle of extract right in front of me. I scooped it up and rolled to my unsteady feet. I only had the one bottle, so I had to make it count.

Grabby tossed a few more chairs, but they came slower and slower. Still, chances were that one of the really heavy ones would hit me eventually. I didn't want to play the odds, so I scurried under one of the long tables and used it for cover as I charged forward. I was a battering ram, and Grabby was the front gate protecting the monk.

He didn't have boiling oil, but he was ready for me. I plowed into his waiting arms, but he was braced and didn't topple over as I had planned. No, instead he got me in a bear hug and hoisted me up so he could throw me back over his head. Unfortunately for Grabby, my extract hand was free, so as I passed by his face, I reached out and shared the love, pepper beetle style.

His momentum carried me up to the top of the arc, but by that time, Grabby wasn't thinking about me anymore. No, he was too busy clawing at his eyes, which isn't a good thing to do when there is an unsupported gnome above your head.

We crashed to the floor with a solid thump, and I was the only one who got up. Grabby must have landed on his noggin, but I couldn't find it in me to feel sorry.

His friend still moaned and rolled around on the floor where I'd left him. I walked over and only staggered into a few tables on the way. That's good, right? When I reached him, I slammed my cane as hard as I could on the floor in front of his crotch.

"Talk."

"Okay! Okay! Don't hit me again!"

I guess he preferred having a chance to bear children more than his ties to the monk.

"Where did the monk go?"

"He went out the back. He was going to the compound. I swear. Don't hit me!"

Damn. If the monk got inside, they would protect him. I ran out the back door and into an alley. Left or right? The Collective compound was to the right, but he could have gone either way. Shit. We'd have to get very lucky to catch up to him now. Better to cut our losses and find Braenoic. At least we could talk to her before the monk did.

I ran around front to our hiding spot to fetch Nerni. The only problem was that she wasn't there. Hrm. The fight hadn't lasted fifteen minutes, had it? No. So where was she? I looked back inside and waved to my friends, but she wasn't there.

Back at our spot, I crawled around and searched the area with more care. I managed to find one of Nerni's hairpins. Not a good sign.

The monk had her; it was the only explanation that made sense. He hadn't gone back to the Collective compound, and his buddies had been delaying me, not trying to stop me. He needed time to get Nerni, but why? I could expose him and his friends just as easily as she could.

Then I realized. The monk, Artemus, wanted to finish the job he'd started with Fudnottin.

My stomach dropped, as if someone pushed me off a cliff. What had I done? How could I have been so stupid? She was what he wanted, not freedom, not to escape.

I needed to pull it together before everything boiled over. All right. Deep breath. What was going on? I wasn't reliving my adventure days--I was helping my friend. Keeping Nerni safe was what mattered. Not solving the puzzle. Not showing up the Spiritual Collective or City Watch. Not impressing old friends. And not outsmarting the bad guy.

Well, maybe outsmarting the bad guy.

That's it. Time to focus.

I pocketed her hairpin and stood up. Then I stumbled into a shrub. My butt hit the cobblestone street with a thud that shot a spike of pain up my spine. I had been going for too long without rest. I needed sleep, but I couldn't afford the time.

I pulled my last Sleep-Be-Gone potion and stared at it. It glowed pale yellow in the darkness, so inviting. I'd drunk too many potions in the past few days, but what else was I going to do?

I pulled the stopper with weary fingers, felt the smooth glass of the vial on my lips, and tilted my head back.

The liquid cooled my throat and caused a tingling sensation. I felt the weariness fade. My muscles bulged. My mind raced. Artemus's plan crystallized in my head. That potion was good stuff, if I do say so myself.

Artemus may have been doing his boss's bidding, but there was more to it. Instead of taking the easy way out, he put himself back in danger to take Nerni and finish his task.

Religious fanatics who would kill and who value their cause over their life scare me. They are beyond reason. I'd underestimated Artemus. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I picked myself up and looked around. My legs shook, as did my hands. The cumulative effect of all the potions caused a weird physiological reaction. I'd seen it happen back in the old days, back when I was young and stupid. It would pass with time, but I didn't have time now. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm my quivering body. Relax. Focus on the problem. Now walk. Left foot. Right foot. Repeat. Nice and steady. Just like mixing. Not too fast, not too slow. Open the eyes and look where you're going.

Speaking of that, where are you going? Where would Artemus go to kill Nerni? Assuming she isn't dead already, that is. No, he had chances to kill her before and didn't. Why not? Instead, he took her down to the Occultist's lair for the ritual, which means he is in league with them, or is one of them. Wouldn't that be

fun? A Collective man and Occultist. That would be for Braenoic to figure out. Me, I had to figure out where he took Nerni.

If he wanted her for a ritual, he would have taken her back underground. I slapped my forehead. It was obvious now that I'd thought of it. I guess too many potions were bad for my brain. When this was all over, I'd have to take a vacation.

Stop! Stop thinking like the old days! It isn't an adventure, damn it! Nerni's life depends on me, I can't, no, I won't let her down. Not again.

I ran a circular search pattern around our hiding spot. The few early morning denizens of the street gave me a wide berth and avoided eye contact--I guess I disturbed them. Artemus wouldn't want to stay out in the open, so he would have entered the sewers the first chance he got.

Ah ha!

In the back of an alley across the street from The Gleaming Chalice, I found a door marked as an entrance to the sewers.

Judging from the fresh scuff marks on the ground in front of the door, there had been a struggle recently.

The door creaked on rusty hinges as I pushed it open. Torches mounted in sconces along the tunnel wall punctuated the darkness below. The tunnel must have seen regular use, or else someone had been expecting Artemus. Either way, I had no trouble following his path.

The tunnel led down at a sharp angle, and then flattened out before reaching the bottom. It opened into a chamber that may have been a large room or cistern at one point, but now it was just another place for crap to accumulate. The floor tilted slightly, and dirty water ran across it in a thin sheet. Algae coated the stone floor, which made running tough, but fresh skid marks showed me the trail.

I ran and stumbled from the doorway to the nearest stone column, and then skidded from column to column until I reached a horse-sized opening on the left side of the room. A trickle of water diverted from the room and traced the steepest way down the new passage. Deep footprints in the mud led down into the darkness. The earthen walls were too soft to hold torches, and no luminescent lichen grew in the area, so no light penetrated past the first few feet. I paused, wishing I had grabbed a torch on the way in. Should I waste time to go get one or trust that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel?

Damn it. I couldn't risk losing the trail. I scrambled back across the algae room, fetched a torch, and returned. I had to hurry, so I leapt down the tunnel as fast as my feet would take me.

The footprints led me down several stories deeper under the city. The tunnel contracted as I went until it was about gnome-sized. Artemus must have had trouble with Nerni in the tight spots--I could see marks in the mud where he fell. I hoped she fought him the entire time.

The walls were made of water-saturated earth down there, not surprising since we must have been below the river. The passage was no cave anymore, but rather a tunnel, perhaps excavated by some large beastie. As long as that beastie wasn't an Outsider, I'd be happy.

I also worried that the tunnel would collapse around me--it didn't look too structurally sound, and I suspected that a large volume of river water waited above my head somewhere. I wanted to meet it less than an Outsider. Well, that was a toss-up. I had no choice, though. I had to follow Artemus.

Then I slipped. It was bound to happen, and when it did, I tried not to think about what made up the "mud" I wallowed in. Yeesh.

I managed to keep the torch alive when I fell backwards, but with it in my left hand and my cane in the right, I had a hard time standing. When I managed to get up, I overcompensated and slipped forward. I threw my hands out in front of me to avoid a face full of muck, and wound up plunging the torch and cane into the ground.

The torch made a strangled fwumph as it left me to fend for myself in the darkness. Sigh.

No use crying about it. I used the torch and stick for resistance in the mud and pushed myself up. Once I was steady, I felt the top of the torch in hopes of lighting it, but mud and water saturated the end. Oh well. At least I could use it and

my stick to feel my way down deeper. I dragged them along the sides of the tunnel, feeling for openings and hoping the damp walls weren't too structural.

It turned out I didn't have to worry about that for very long, since the ground took a sharp turn down and I slid, feet first, into the unknown.

I tumbled and slid through the dirty passage. The ground battered my weary body on all sides, and mud forced itself into my pants, shirt, and nose. At least I managed to keep my mouth and eyes closed and free of muck, thank the gods. The torch disappeared right away, but I death-gripped my cane. If I dropped it, my stick would be gone forever, and I had a feeling I would need it again before I resurfaced.

The trip probably only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like minutes. Maybe I was so tired, or maybe I hit my head too many times on the way down, but at the bottom, I sat there dazed for half a minute before I realized the fun ride was over. That's when something hit me in the back of my already-tender head and I blacked out.

#

I woke up with a splash of cold water to my face. At least I told myself it was water.

I kept my eyes closed so I had time to get my bearings and figure out the situation. Let's see: my hands were tied behind my back, a fire crackled nearby, several people chanted quietly, and Artemus spoke to me.

"Wake up, runt. Time for a little ceremony."

Yeah, that would mean the situation was bad.

I opened my eyes and saw what I feared; I was back in the fire pit where they'd sacrificed Melda. Only this time Nerni was the one strapped to the rock, and I was the one tied to the iron ring in the wall. The wicked priest leaned down and grinned right in my face, so close that I could smell the stink of his breath. When he cackled at me, I realized that the priest was none other than our old friend Artemus. Well, well, I guess he had joined the Occultists after all.

"Well, well, I see you've taken on some new responsibilities with the Collective. Does your boss know?"

"Stupid runt." He shook his head and made the bones of the headdress rattle back and forth with a hollow sound. "You and your friend are about to help me finish our ritual from yesterday. Better late than never, you know."

He slapped me across the mouth before I could reply and I tasted blood once again. I shook off the blow and watched him walk back to Nerni, presumably to start the ritual.

I yelled and taunted him, but Artemus ignored me. He retrieved the jagged ceremonial knife, waved it around to show me, and laid it next to Nerni, and then he went out of sight, presumably to gather more items for the ritual. I had to act fast, but what could I do?

"Nerni! Nerni! Are you okay?"

She lay still on the slab, but she had all her clothes and was tied down, so I assumed she was unhurt and conscious. So why didn't she respond? The top of her head pointed towards me, so I couldn't see if her eyes were open or closed.

I tossed a pebble at her, and then another.

"Wake up, Nerni!"

"Zook?" Her voice wavered. "Is that you? Oh gods, what is he going to do? I can't take this!"

She twisted her body in a sharp arch and strained against the straps, but they held fast. Her hands reddened as the straps dug in and cut off the circulation, but she remained trapped. With a whoosh of released breath, Nerni fell back to the rock and gasped for air.

"Keep trying, Nerni, don't give up." She wouldn't be able to free herself, but it would distract her from thinking about Artemus's plan.

And speaking of plans, I needed one right away. A thin rope had replaced the chain that held Nerni last time. It snaked from my left wrist to my right through the iron ring that remained firm in the wall above my head. I wanted to inspect the ring more closely, but not if anyone watched.

I stood and scanned the room. No one here but five chanting priests and us gnomes. The priests chanted with eyes closed, oblivious to everything around them. Good. Now if I could just figure something out before Artemus returned.

The ring looked as solid as ever. I put my feet against the wall and pulled out, but the wall kept hold of its precious ring. Damn. Damn! I ripped a boot off my foot and bashed the ring as hard as I could. Come on, move! Wiggle! Something! Anything!

Nothing. It didn't budge. Then, without warning, my potion-enhanced energy flagged, and exhaustion set in. Sigh. We were lost.

I kicked the wall out of frustration. It hurt my toes, but I welcomed the distraction. I wanted to kick with both feet, so I grabbed hold of the ring and pulled my feet from the ground.

"Youch!"

"What? Zook, what? Oh gods, it's starting!"

"No, no. I cut myself. Nothing to worry about."

Nerni said something else, but I didn't hear her. I stood there, staring at the blood welling up in my palms when it hit me. The ring wasn't so tough after all.

I inspected it again, but this time, instead of a smooth surface, I found sharp pitting and indentations on the top. The acid! The acid must have spilled on the ring last time, and quietly deteriorated some of the metal. When I hit it with my boot, the weakened parts broke off, leaving sharp edges to cut my hands.

Or my ropes.

I wanted to tell Nerni what I found, but I couldn't risk getting a priest's attention. They might not be watching, but they must be listening.

I put my boot back on and then looped the rope over the now-jagged top of the ring. I pulled down with one hand, and then the other as fast as I could. The rope frayed little by little as it passed back and forth over the ring.

The rhythmic chanting, the crackle of the fire, the sounds of Nerni's struggle, and the steady oscillation of the rope took advantage of my exhaustion and hypnotized me. The situation almost seemed relaxing.

Then came the crunch of boots on gravel. Artemus returning.

The rope refused to break. Pulling faster helped, but it was going to take too long. I sat down and put my hands behind me before the crunching boots came into view, but I left the rope looped over the sharp spot.

Artemus appeared at the top of the pit. He carried a stone bowl in both hands and struggled to get down the stairs without dropping it. I bit back a sarcastic remark--which took a lot of effort--so as not to draw his attention. I shouldn't have worried, though, since all his attention seemed focused on Nerni's squirming, the pervert. Still, better to play it safe.

I continued to rub the rope back and forth, albeit with less gusto than before. By keeping the rope taut, I could feel it give way, thread by thread. Soon I would be free. And then what?

Artemus let Nerni struggle while he set up the bowl at the base of the rock slab. The slab tilted down towards the bowl, which was on the opposite side from me and thus out of sight. I didn't need to see it, though, to know that the bowl would be at the bottom of the blood channel carved in the top of the slab.

Now that he was all set up, Artemus began chanting. He performed some ceremony involving knife waving and a little dance. He looked stupid, but I thought it better to not point that out to him.

Nerni stopped struggling and watched Artemus above her. A gnome with less spirit would have pleaded for her life, but not Nerni. She spat at him, but unfortunately he was too tall. Then she let flow a stream of expletives that would have put her in good standing with the dwarves. Some of her phrases were so vile that Artemus stumbled through his chant, but he kept going despite the distraction.

Then, without warning, he screamed and dropped towards Nerni, knife first. "Nooooo!" We both yelled at the same time, and the world slowed to a crawl.

As I watched Artemus drop, inch-by-inch, my stomach clenched. The bits of bone tethered to his mask by strings seemed to hang in the air like dragonflies until his movement dragged them down with him. His knife remained high for a moment, and then arced down towards Nerni. My breathing stopped and every muscle in my body tightened.

Artemus landed on his knees at Nerni's feet and brought the knife down to her chest, but he stopped short of impaling her. Instead he ripped it towards him and sliced her shirt down the front. I could see the terror in Nerni's eyes, but other than a thin line of blood peeking out of the new gap in her shirt, she seemed unharmed. That wouldn't last long.

I pulled the ropes as fast as I could and loaded them with as much tension as possible. All the while, I kept an eye on Artemus. He proceeded to strip off Nerni's shirt and then paint an odd pattern on her face and chest with what was probably blood from a small earthen jar. I hoped it was at least animal blood of some sort.

When he finished painting, he put down the brush and jar and grabbed the knife. He reached for her trousers, and that sent me over the edge. My vision narrowed into a black tunnel; Artemus at one end and me at the other. The sounds of the room faded into the background and I went into the Zone.

Warriors talk about the Zone as if it was a physical place. A tranquil garden or somewhere totally relaxing. Nothing bothers you. Nothing distracts you. You just are. Your spirit becomes entwined, integrated with the battle. Every movement is fluid, part of a dance. Your perception is enhanced and you can almost predict what will happen before it does, as if the whole fight had been choreographed beforehand.

I was in the Zone when the rope finally snapped.

I was a rabid hunting dog unleashed on an unsuspecting rabbit. I flew forward and plowed into Artemus so hard that I knocked the breath out of him and sent the knife flying across the room through the fire.

We landed in a heap, and I came out on top. I saw his mouth moving, but I couldn't hear his words. The pounding of my blood in my ears drowned them out. I pummeled him in the face, but alas, I was too small to keep him down. With a great heave, Artemus threw me off and towards the fire.

I landed on my feet, but momentum propelled me towards the flames, and I was too close to stop. I stumbled forward, held my breath, clamped my eyes shut, and covered my head with my arms. Then I added effort to momentum and hurled myself through the fire.

My muddy clothes protected me from the worst of the heat, but it still burned. Searing pain in my exposed hands made them clench. Behind my arm and eyelids, my vision flooded with bright orange. And then darkness and chill rushed back.

I tripped and fell when I landed, but I lived, and that's what mattered. However, I did smell burning clothing and hair, so I rolled over. Was that enough? Were the flames out? I couldn't dally in the middle of a fight, so I had to hope my clothes wouldn't erupt in a pillar of flame in the next few minutes. Time to get up before Artemus caught me.

Something poked me in the back when I twisted around in an attempt to stand. What have we here? Artemus's knife. Interesting.

I scooped it up as I stood and then scanned the pit. The priests chanted away as if nothing strange happened. Okay then. What to do now? Before I could pick a direction to run, Artemus rounded the left side of the fire.

I ran the other way and he gave chase. On the far side of the fire, Nerni struggled once again to free herself, but her luck was no better than before. I skidded to a halt next to her and slashed the leather strap holding her right wrist. Her arm snapped up and hugged me briefly.

"Look out, Zook!"

I dropped the knife on her painted chest in time to enjoy having my left arm yanked by the rope that still trailed behind me. I tumbled over and screamed as pain shot up from my wrist. Actually, I noticed the pain from my shoulder more--I feared that Artemus had dislodged it from the comfortable resting spot it usually inhabited. I clawed at the rope with my other hand as he dragged me across the floor.

Artemus cackled above me like an insane monkey. His head looked human again now that his headdress decorated the ground somewhere. Well, human except for the crazed look in his eyes and rage-distorted features. I wanted to bash the rage

off his face with my bare hands, but he pulled me off balance every time I got up.
Damn these ropes!

All the tumbling around knocked me out of the Zone, and all of the effort wore me out. I knelt panting, waiting for him to attack, but Artemus laughed instead.
The bastard.

"Beg for your life, runt!"

I turned my head and stared him down.

"That's right, you worm, kneel before me. Pay homage to my Masters!

Once your friend's blood summons them forth to our world, you will feed their hunger!"

He had lost his humanity. Maybe it happened a long time ago, or maybe it left him as I watched. Either way, I knew I had to find the energy for one more attempt. I closed my eyes and reached deep down inside. I blocked out the world and focused on the spot of light that was my inner self. And there it was. A Last Resort. An inner reserve of energy for just this kind of situation. I tapped it.

I used my last burst of strength to roll on the rope Artemus held. I rolled and pinned the rope beneath me, then kept rolling--winding the rope around me like a spool. I took him by surprise. He didn't have time to unwrap the rope from his hand, so it jerked him off his feet onto the ground with me.

I had one chance to end the fight. I aimed a kick to his groin and put all the strength I could muster behind it. I kicked, but at that moment he flailed about and my foot impacted on his knee.

Shit.

He laughed, but his voice cut off in a croak. I looked up to see a beautiful sight: Nerni--wild haired and painted up so much that she looked like an Outsider--standing over the sprawled out monk, knife at his throat.

"Priests! Help m . . . urk!"

This time my kick connected.

"Nerni, stop!"

She raised the knife high above her head and gripped it with both hands. Artemus and I lay beneath her. I flopped out in exhaustion and the monk rolled around in the fetal position, moaning. Nerni put one foot on his shoulder to hold him steady, and in his pain, Artemus ignored her. Nerni stared down, but her face showed no emotion. Her eyes stared out into the distance and her breaths came long and slow. In fact, she betrayed her intentions only by her hands, which quivered with strain while her knuckles glowed white in the light of the room.

"Nerni, don't do it."

"He doesn't deserve to live." She used the same tone of voice as if she chatted about the weather. I'd seen people in that state before, and no matter what happened next, she would have deep emotional scars to deal with. I couldn't let her kill him, though. I knew what it was like to kill a person, and I wanted to protect her from learning that feeling.

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean you have to do it. Let Braenoic or the Watchmen handle it."

"No, I want to do it myself." The knife still hovered over the unsuspecting monk.

"If you do it, there's no going back. He was right. They'll be able to tell that you did it. You'll be arrested, sent to the prison, and maybe executed. Is that what you want? Is that how you want to honor Fud and Melda's memories?"

Her hands relaxed and she dropped them to rest in front of her face so she could stare at the knife.

"No." Such a quiet voice.

I extracted myself from the tangle of ropes and relieved her of the burden of the knife. Once it left her fingers, tears welled up and she cried. I hugged her close and let my shoulder soak up her tears.

Behind her, the priests no longer chanted. They were frightened old men, scrawny and unkempt, and they huddled together away from us. I guess they never saw the sacrificial offering fight back. I pointed the knife towards the stairs leading out of the room and waved them out. They didn't need much convincing.

When Nerni finished crying, she kicked Artemus and then gave me an innocent look.

"What? He was getting up."

I rolled my eyes at her.

"Just watch him for a minute while I untie these ropes."

They were tighter than I expected, and I had to cut them off, which was a shame, since I wanted a piece long enough to tether the monk. At least with the ropes off my wrists, I could take off my cloak. In all the excitement, I hadn't paid much attention to my friend, but now her half-naked and painted body made those other emotions find their way back to the surface. Looking away, I passed her the charred cloak.

"Put some clothes on, will you? And wipe off that paint, or whatever it is. You look terrible."

"Thanks, Zook. For everything."

She startled me with a tight hug from behind. I turned to hug her back, and saw the monk crawling towards the stairs.

"No, no, no. You stay here. Nerni, take the knife and make sure he doesn't try anything."

She gave me an evil grin but promised to be good. I needed a chance to work. A plan coalesced in my head, but it wasn't clear if it would work the way I hoped. Fiddling with the rope gave me time to think. The rope pieces were short enough that I didn't want to cut them anymore, so I had to settle for binding his hands behind his back with the leather straps from the sacrificial rock slab. I tied the two pieces of rope together to make a leash with a bowline knot at the end. While Nerni pressed the knife to his back, I threw the leash around his neck.

"What are you going to do with him, Zook? You aren't going to let him go again, are you? We can't give him to the Collective. They'll free him. I'd rather kill him myself and face the consequences." With that, she pushed the knife hard enough to elicit a yelp from the monk.

"Hey! Watch it! Remember that nothing has changed. You can't hurt me, and when I get free this time, I'll make sure you both end up as Outsider food!" Artemus spat blood, but it fell short of me. Not like anyone would notice an extra stain after the beating these clothes had taken.

"Get up off your knees. It's time for you to make amends." I gave him an evil grin and winked at Nerni. "Nerni, let him up, but keep the knife ready."

#

He wouldn't stand, which was fine by me. I gave the rope a yank that choked him back and threw him off balance. Then I tugged again and laid him out on his back, his tied arms beneath him.

"Stand up and walk or I'll let Nerni use the knife on you. She won't kill you, but it won't be pleasant, and you won't be quite the same man ever again." I wouldn't really have let her do it, would I? Nah. He would get what he deserved, but we weren't sadistic. Well, maybe Nerni was right then, judging by the way she brandished her weapon.

The waving knife motivated him to stand up and walk, like a good little pony.

I led him up the steps to the ledge above. Outside the fire pit room, the cave looked just as I remembered it, only now there were supplies and ritualistic paraphernalia strewn about. I spotted my cane in the rubble and had Nerni fetch it for me. I'd feared that I'd lost it for good this time, but luck favored me once again.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Your salvation is at hand. You get the chance to make amends to those you wronged." I shoved him up the tunnel--which wasn't easy to do given our size difference, but Nerni was the only one watching to be impressed by it. I followed close behind, and Nerni brought up the rear.

In the dark, the human couldn't see as well as we could, so he bruised his shins on the rocks and broken walls, but I didn't have much sympathy. I didn't have much sympathy for this scum at all.

We walked the same path I had before, when we tracked the Outsider, but this time the frogling bodies were all gone. At first I wondered where they were, but traveling down the tunnel further soon answered the question.

I could hear the chorus of croaking voices long before we entered the sewer nexus. The large stone courtyard was filled with the little amphibious beings, both live and dead. They had piled all of their slain brothers and sisters in the center of the courtyard and sang as they mourned. Then, as they noticed us, the chorus faded away and a guttural mummer filled the place. We stayed back at the edge and let a party of froglings approach us. I didn't want to disturb them any more than I had to.

One of the froglings in the group must have been a shaman or priest or whatever they have in their religion--go figure, the Spiritual Collective didn't reach out to the slimy ones among us, so they kept their own practices going down here.

The shaman, who wore a necklace of bone and a tunic woven with fish scales that shimmered in the pale fungal light, walked up to us with no fear. He pointed a gnarled old wood staff at me and said something in their language.

I had to shake my head and point at my ear. "I can't understand you." Hopefully he understood the common language, even if he couldn't speak it.

"I am sorry to disturb your mourning ritual." I tried to use easy words. "This man," I pointed at Artemus, "needed to see what happened." Artemus figured it out at that point and struggled to get free. I had to get Nerni's help to keep hold of the rope as he pulled back with all his might. Trying to remain calm, I continued. "He is the one who released the monster that killed your friends."

The frogling croaked at me and clearly didn't understand. So I pointed at the corpses, then at Artemus. Then I looked the frogling shaman squarely in the eyes.

"He. Did. It."

I watched as the shaman processed the words. His eyes dilated and opened wide when he figured it out. I nodded and handed the rope to his entourage, as he turned and spoke to them in a rapid staccato of clicks and croaks. Then he turned back to me and bowed. I returned the bow, and turned to leave.

"Come on, Nerni, don't look back."

When we returned to her kitchen, Nerni tried to make us some tea, but her hands shook so much that she couldn't pour the boiling water into the mugs. I took the kettle from her and helped her into her chair. I turned to pour the water and when I looked back, she had her face in her hands, sobbing.

I waited for her to say something like, "Oh, Zook, what did we do?" I would comfort her, tell her it would be okay with time. I'd killed before. I didn't do it lightly, but when it had to be done, it had to be done. Nerni lived in a much more pleasant world, where death came at the end of a long and fulfilling life, slowly but surely, like the setting of the sun.

"Oh, Zook." Here it came. "I hope they make him pay. He needs to do more than die for what he did to Fud, to Mum, and to me. Those froglings can't punish him enough!" She smacked her hands down on the table, spilling the hot tea. I watched it run in rivulets down the creases in the worn-out wood. Nerni had a lot of healing to do.

"Listen, Nerni. What we did, we had to, because he was right. If we'd taken him to the Watchmen or back to the Collective, he would have gone free. The froglings will give him the justice he deserves. I didn't do it out of a sense of revenge, and you shouldn't think that way either. Gods know I felt it. I wanted to hurt him, but if you let the revenge drive you, you won't be able to heal. I know. I've fought that beast before."

"No. I'm not sorry for it. I just wish I could have done it myself."

I shook my head and sighed. We sat there and drank our tea, staring off into the distance.

"And what about his boss?" Now she sounded tired, no longer angry, but with a hint of afraid. "He said he had friends. What if they come for me?"

"Get some rest. And tomorrow morning, get out of town for a while. I'll talk to Braenoic tomorrow and take care of everything. Why don't you go to your grandparents for a few weeks."

We talked for a while more, but she didn't really listen. Her anger and fear clouded her mind, but at least I managed to get her to promise to go stay with her family and recover. She needed to get away from here.

I walked home, bruised, tired, and sore. What a time it had been. The past two days seemed like a month, but that old spirit of adventure filled me again. I wanted more in order to shake the dull drudgery from my life.

First, however, I had to meet with Brae and wrap things up. I wanted to believe that she would trust me and do the right thing, but my heart had doubts. She couldn't seem to accept that someone in the Collective could do evil, and tomorrow I'd have to make her choose between her Collective brother and me.

Morning came far too soon. I'm one of those people who can't sleep in, no matter how tired I am. My body just rebels and won't stay still. I hate it on days like this, but on the other hand, I get a lot of work done in the morning, and today I had to get ready to see Braenoic.

What would I tell her? I couldn't very well tell her what we did with the monk, but she had to know what he said and his relationship with the Occultists. If there were corruption in the Spiritual Collective, she would want to do something about it. She would want to cleanse the stain. Right? Yeah, that or she'd throw me into a dungeon for giving the monk over to the froglings.

I spent too long bathing. I didn't want to go see Braenoic, but I had to. Finding things to do and taking too long to do them postponed the inevitable.

It turned out my procrastination did me no good. A knock at the door. Braenoic standing on my doorstep in a full suit of chain mail and wearing a helm with twin ram horns curling around her ears. Her sword hung from her belt and she'd strapped a massive steel shield to her back. It looked like she had found out about the monk and was here to bring me to justice. How did she find out so fast? No matter. Too late to do anything about it.

"Are you going to let me in?"

What option did I have?

"Sure. Feel free to leave your gear by the door. No need to wear it around inside."

"No. I think I'll keep it on, if you don't mind."

So that was how it was going to be. My best friend of all those years come to bring me to justice for helping my former lover.

The thought tore through my soul, leaving a shredded void where my heart used to live. The pain from the wound consumed me, threatened to knock me down and leave me helpless on the floor. Never before in my life had a friend betrayed me like that. No, not the betrayal so much as the realization that I couldn't count on my old friend the way I always could in the past. She'd let me down, and that's the one thing a true friend should never do, no matter how much time had passed, no matter what had changed. And the worst part of the whole mess: since Brae had betrayed me, I wouldn't be able to keep my promise to protect Nerni.

All the while, Brae stared into my soul with her icy eyes. I stared back, using her steady gaze against her, using it as a rock to steady myself on. Her strength kept the void that had expanded to my gut from knocking me down. Gave me time to recover from the initial shock.

Only one question remained: do I fight, run, or give myself up?

I couldn't bring myself to fight her. That left two choices, and now that she stood there in my foyer, it didn't matter either way.

I shrugged and gestured to the den. She followed me in and we sat in chairs that faced one another across a low table.

Running would have been pointless. She knew where I lived and I had no desire to live life on the run. Besides, she left her men back at the Collective, so

maybe I still had a chance to convince her that I was right. After all we'd been through together she'd believe me. Right?

"Look, Brae, maybe I acted a little rashly, but can you blame me? The monk admitted everything, and you know as well as I do that the Collective wouldn't have given him justice. They couldn't take the bad publicity. I had to do it."

"Zook, what are you talking about?"

Whoops.

"Nothing. What are you talking about?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Then why did you come here, armed and ready for battle? Didn't you come here to arrest me?"

"No. Why? Did you do something wrong?"

"Pfft. Who, me? What . . . come on. Why did you come here anyway? I thought we were going in to talk to the Bishop together?"

She hesitated and shifted in her seat, looking me over.

"I went to see him last night. If evil has tainted the Collective, I had to know."

Maybe the Collective hadn't corrupted the old Brae I knew and loved after all.

"And what did you find out?"

"Bishop Uthul told me that Brother Artemus did come to him earlier in the week, enraged and speaking of Fudnottin's prototype as an abomination. The Bishop spoke with him about the futility of converting faithless technologists and counseled him to let the gnomes live as they would. He told Artemus to channel his anger into his missionary work with the Occultists. After I spoke with him last night, he's come to believe that the Occultists have brought Brother Artemus into their unholy congregation, and that he might have convinced them to kill Fudnottin. The Bishop sent me over here to protect you, since Artemus might try to get you next."

"Ah, well, that would explain the armor."

Whew. The empty space pulling my gut apart faded away and my pulse slowed--Brae had come through after all. The sun must have come out from behind a cloud, because her armor seemed more luminous than before. Her face changed too, softer, as if she'd gone back in time to when we lived the adventurous life. The Brae I'd known and loved had returned. Maybe she'd revert back to the new Brae again at the end of the day, but for the moment, we were once again the closest of friends, soul mates.

"We shouldn't be sitting here. I need to get you back to the Collective compound. We can organize a search party to find Brother Artemus."

"Yeah, about that . . . Nerni and I ran into him last night and we had a little chat. Remember how I said he was at the last ritual, the one where Melda died? Well, it seems Arty got a promotion with the Occultists and now he's performing the rituals himself."

"What do you mean? Did you confront him?" Did a shadow pass over her face?

"I won't bore you with the details, but Brother Artemus kidnapped Nerni again and tried to sacrifice her in another ceremony to summon up an Outsider. I managed to stop him before he did any physical damage, but the experience left her traumatized. But don't worry. She's strong. She'll pull through."

"I'm glad to hear she's all right. I didn't believe you before and let him go. I'm sorry for that. I bear the responsibility for any pain he's caused." She glanced around the room. "But where is he now?" Her eyes narrowed as she fixed me in place with a look. "You killed him didn't you? Oh, Zook. Tell me you had to do it to defend yourself and Nerni."

"Hey now, I didn't kill him. Well, not exactly." I told her about the frogling shaman and crowd and Arty's promise to get free and exact revenge. She listened and shook her head. "Like I said when you came in: if I'd brought him to the Collective, he wouldn't have been punished and Nerni and I would be in danger right now."

"Don't you trust me, Zook?" She gave me a pained look.

"Of course I do. What kind of question is that?" There went her standard look. "Well, okay, maybe I worried that the Spiritual Collective corrupted you, but you came through for me."

Metal-encased arms closed around me, pulling me in tight and wrinkling my silk shirt. I didn't care. Our hug went on and on. First it took the form of a greeting between old buddies--safe distance and all. Then it grew into something that symbolized the renewal of our friendship and acceptance of the changes we'd both been through. Mostly her. But neither of us pulled away, and the hug became an embrace, something new for us. She pressed in close and lifted me to my tiptoes. My head pressed into the shoulder dimple above her collarbone and I felt her breath warm the skin of my bald spot.

Everything felt right.

Except her story. Something nagged.

"Wait . . ."

"Why?"

"No, I mean something you said is bugging me."

Before she could respond, my front door crashed open and mercenaries in sooty chain mail burst in, swords drawn.

Brae spun me away like a dancer just in time to avoid taking a sword to my head. With the same motion, she twirled and deflected a second blade with the shield on her back. By the time she finished her turn, she faced the men with her sword in one hand and her shield in the other. I still stood there like an idiot, but hey, I was out of practice.

I recovered the moment a mercenary charged me, but lacking a weapon, I had to run. He chased me across the den and around the low table and then back into the foyer, where my cane hung on a hook near the door. Dodging and weaving through the mercenaries took some skill, but I managed not to embarrass myself and grabbed my cane.

The wall helped me make a quick stop. I used it to push off and propel myself back at the guy chasing me. He didn't expect a gnome on the rebound, so he swerved away as we passed. I, on the other hand, expected him to do just that, and a

two-handed swing with my cane caught him in the throat. I hoped to catch his neck in the crook, so I could pull him down, but got lucky and the metal end of the horn connected with his windpipe, crushing the fragile organ.

The next guy didn't give me time to critique my handiwork, so I had to hope that I'd put him down for the count while I parried a flurry of attacks. Splinters of wood from the cane flew in my face from the strength of his blows, but the mystery metal held strong, deflecting the common steel. My arm, however, felt more like the wood--ready to give at any moment. This fellow knew what he was doing as he backed me into the corner by the stairs to the basement. I had to get by him. If I got into the basement, I could get a potion to use on him. But he gave no opening, no chance to slip by.

Then he slumped to the ground in a shower of broken glass. Lumo stood in the doorway that led to the basement holding the jagged neck of a Number 8 flask--the thick-walled style that cost a lot of silver. I gave him a thumbs-up.

"Good timing, Lumo!"

"Thanks, Master. What's going on?" He wobbled and had to brace himself on the door jamb.

"Armed thugs, Spiritual Collective conspiracies, love in the air, and all that good stuff. I'm glad you decided to make it for the fun part. Come on, there's more of them."

I sprinted back into the den to find Brae holding off three at once. A corpse lay at her feet, failing to trip her. She sure knew her stuff. I'd always been impressed in the old days when I saw her do her thing with the two-handed great axe--a real dance of death. The sword and board combo lacked the fast-paced whack-whack-kill-kill of the great axe, but it had its own rhythmic grace.

Ever the professional, Brae didn't betray our presence to the mercenaries, so I was able to hook one. He was too big and well planted to pull over, but a hook to the groin is a highly effective way to get someone's attention. When he looked down, Brae bashed him with her shield and put him on the ground. A quick thrust of her sword ensured that he wouldn't get back up.

Lumo picked up one of the easy chairs, but he must have still been groggy from his ordeal, because he sent it sailing past his mercenary. His target then spun and arced his sword towards Lumo's green head. I whipped my cane up and caught the end of the blade in the crook, which saved Lumo, but the force of the blow ripped the cane from my hands. Splinters imbedded themselves in my palms in an explosion of ragged pain.

Brae slashed her sword at the merc's unguarded ribs. The blade must have been enchanted, because it cut through the metal links like a cave troll through cobwebs and slipped into his side. Then she tore it free with a crimson spray. He cried out and dropped his weapon, then fell to his knees, out of the fight.

The last merc attacked while Brae's attention was on the man she'd just mortally wounded. I saw it happen in slow motion, but I was helpless to stop him. He lunged and caught Brae in the back, just south of her left shoulder blade. Her armor held at first, but the force of the blow knocked her down. He kept going, and before long, the sword pushed through her chain mail and pinned her to the floor.

I yelled. I let out all my frustration and anger and fear and every other emotion that had built up inside me and I continued yelling as I picked up a sword that had fallen at my feet and ran at the merc. I gripped the weapon, which was almost as long as I was tall, like a lance and charged. Grinding the splinters into my hands would hurt later, but I couldn't feel anything in the heat of the moment. The merc tried to pull his own sword free, but it stuck in Brae's back. He threw up his arms, but my blade slid between them and into his mouth. It kept going and only slowed a little as it broke into his skull and again as it went out the far side. Recognition flashed in his eyes for a split second, and then they unfocused.

I pushed forward again so he wouldn't fall on my friend.

Before the corpse reached the floor, I bent to check on Brae's status. Involuntary groans escaped her throat as she struggled to unpin herself, and she flinched when I touched her shoulder.

"Don't move, Brae."

"The mercenaries?"

"All dead or out of it. We're safe now."

"Good. Agggh! This thing hurts. I can't believe I let my guard down. I haven't made a mistake like that in years. You're a distraction now." But she smiled when she said it.

"Don't move," heh heh. That got a scowl. "I'm going to get a healing potion, and then I'll pour it on while Lumo pulls the sword loose. You'll be fine."

I retrieved one of the fresh bottles and hurried back upstairs, only stopping to gather some clean rags.

Lumo staggered around emptying the merc's pockets. Between his injuries and his lack of fighting experience, he'd have to stay behind when we responded to this attack the only way we could: by going after the Bishop. I knew he had to be behind it all.

I figured Brae wouldn't require too much convincing.

"Okay, Brae. Hold still while Lumo pulls the sword. And Lumo, don't wiggle it. She's been through enough." I couldn't pour the healing potion on before he removed the sword, or else her flesh would heal around the blade and seal it in. Then we'd have to hurt her all over again to get it out.

Lumo is much stronger than me, and he had no trouble getting the blade out of the floor and her flesh. He did have to put a foot on her shoulder to get the blade free, but she grunted and took the pain like a trooper.

As soon as he started pulling, blood welled up and oozed out with the metal, but her skin made a serviceable seal against the sword. Once the blade tapered down to the point, however, more and more blood escaped, until it flowed freely like a tapped keg at a barbarian tavern.

I shoved a pile of rags under the wound on her front, and then pressed the rest onto the hole streaming blood on her back. Blood saturated the rags in a few seconds, but at least with them in place, the blood wouldn't flow fast enough to wash out my healing potion.

Lumo stretched a rag over the wound and leaned back to give me room to pour the potion. Red-tinged bubbles foamed up where the potion mixed with the

blood. I heard them fizz as they appeared and then ran off the rag as the potion flowed.

A few seconds of healing did enough to stop the major blood flow. I had Lumo remove the rag so that her skin wouldn't heal over it, and then I continued to pour until the blood stopped altogether. Fresh skin--red and raw--grew over the wound. Good enough for now.

The pain from the rapid healing must have been intense because Brae had passed out sometime during the process. We rolled her over and healed the exit wound the same way we healed the wound on her back. After that, there was no chance that Lumo and I would be able to lift her, armor and all, to the couch, so we put a pillow under her head and covered her with a blanket that had already been ruined in the fray. She needed to rest and recover, I needed to remove the splinters from my hand, and Lumo needed to clean up the mercenaries.

Somebody wanted my friends and me dead. They knew where I lived, and they weren't afraid to send mercenaries to kill us in my home in broad daylight. Death threats I can handle. Attempted murder crosses the line. I had to give them a message that would discourage future attacks, and the best way to do that was to make sure that everyone who came to kill us vanished from the world.

I looked out the front door to make sure we didn't have any spectators and then pushed it closed. Privacy time.

Two of the mercenaries were alive but unconscious, one bore a mortal wound from Braenoic's sword, and two were corpses. Brae and I would have to finish our work, and I didn't have time to deal with these thugs. Besides, the old me knew what had to be done. I used a potion that usually sells to surgeons. A little will put a patient into a deep sleep so they won't thrash around during an operation. A lot will put them to sleep for good. Less blood to clean up that way.

When I'd cleaned the worst of the splinters, I helped Lumo strip the mercs of their armor and weapons so they would be light enough to carry, and then dragged the corpses down to the basement. There were plenty of ways to get rid of corpses. Most of them did not involve providing explanations to the City Watch.

Time to put an end to the situation.

I splashed cold water on Brae's face. It did the trick. Once she had recovered her wits, I spoke with her to make sure we both understood the situation.

"As I was saying, something didn't seem quite right."

"Yeah," she looked at the blood around my den, "you could say that."

"The Bishop told you he knew about Artemus and that you should come here to protect me?"

"Yes . . . why?"

"Artemus said he wasn't alone. What if it was the Bishop? What if he sent you here so he could get rid of both of us at once?"

"Hmmm." I could see the wheels turning. Then she paused and nodded to herself. "I think we need to have a talk with Bishop Uthul."

"Thank you. It's about time."

"Hold on, Zook. I said talk, not kill. We're not sure it was him."

"I'm sure. So can we at least hurt him a little?"

The roll in her eyes told me to let it drop. The way she cleaned and sharpened her sword told me that she expected to do more than just talk once we found the Bishop.

We'd set our plans. We knew how to get ready for a confrontation and we each prepared in our own way. She cleaned her gear as she mumbled prayers. I instructed Lumo to fix the front door and to wait for me to return. I wrote two copies of a letter with everything we'd learned and told him to give one to Nerni and the other to Tillman if I didn't return. I restocked my potion belt and then sanded the worst of the notches out of my cane. I'd need to find a druid to heal the wood for me later, but for now I had to make sure I could use it and not get more splinters in my hands.

Yep, we knew how to make sure we'd win the fight and how to cover our bets in case we lost. But what had happened between us?

"So, Brae, about before . . ."

"Zook, I've always loved you as a friend, but seeing you again after all the years that passed . . . now it's all confusing. And I'm not sure how to deal with it."

"I know what you mean. We never had the romance thing between us, right? I'm not sure how to process it in my mind. You're still good old Brae, but now you're something more as well."

"There's that," she nodded, "but for me there's more. I'm a Knight-Lieutenant Paladin with the Spiritual Collective. I've sworn devotion to the Order. I don't know how to reconcile that with my feelings for you."

"Tell you what. Let's do the healthy thing and bottle up our emotions deep inside. Once we've dealt with the Bishop, we can take our time and figure out what to do."

"Okay. That's a good plan. We need to focus."

I dropped my cane and gave her a hug that would make a halfling grandmother proud. We held each other longer than necessary, and it felt good. So I

thought, what the hell, and kissed her. Her eyes flew open wide with shock, but she didn't pull away.

The kiss didn't last nearly long enough, but we had work to do; so, like everything good, it ended. We gazed into each other's souls as we held our embrace a moment longer and then we parted.

"Starting . . . Now!" That got her to laugh. When it comes to breaking tension, I'm a pro. The old group probably kept me around for my comic relief as much as for my healing potions.

#

We rode in pre-battle silence. There was nothing to say to one another until we got closer.

Times like this were what I used to live for. Adrenaline levels rising, tension in the air, and the very real possibility that you or your friends could die. Some people craved the rush of mortal peril. They didn't usually last long and they took their group out with them. I, and everyone I adventured with, knew the risks, and we used that knowledge to stay sharp, but we always had other reasons for what we did. The promise of treasure or recovering lost knowledge. Helping the weak or simply the pleasure of exploring the unknown.

Riding across town with Brae brought everything I used to live for back to me. When I looked at her, my chest tightened and I had to smile. Wonderful.

Clouds covered the sky. Billowing masses, heavy with water and displaying all shades of gray, slid past one another as they moved inland. They tumbled in the wind that reached all the way from the ground to the heavens and threatened to dump their load at any moment.

The wind blew the tail of my cloak out behind me as we rode and sent a chill through my body. The humidity coupled with the cold sapped all the heat from me by the time we crossed the river. That's about when I felt the first icy droplets of water on my face. Each splash stung with cold, but the staccato pain served to focus my anger and drown out my worries. I might be out of shape and practice, but I'd grown smarter in the years since I'd quit adventuring. We'd be able to handle the Bishop. I had no worries. Let him try his best to stop us.

Brae's murmured prayers turned into curses as we rode, so I cocked my head and gave her a raised eyebrow.

"I can't believe a bishop would set us up like that."

"Well, I'm pretty convinced."

"Oh, I think he did it. I just can't understand how someone could become a bishop and still be capable of calculated murder like that. Didn't the Collective officials see the blackness in his soul?"

"Maybe he's just weak, not evil. Covering his tracks the only way he can. Power is addictive and corrupting. He sees us as a threat to his position in the Collective, so he had to defend himself."

"That's a poor excuse. As a Collective leader, he should be willing to admit his failing and ask for forgiveness."

"True, but most people don't share your devotion and trust in the Collective."

"I'll give him one chance to make amends. If he doesn't take it, then I'll have to do my duty and arrest him. The High Council can sort it out."

"Will we bring your Paladins?"

"No. If his wrongdoing stems from weakness, we should keep it quiet. With fewer people around, he'll be more likely to see the error in his ways and give himself up. If I go in there with a full squad, he'll go on the defensive so he doesn't lose face."

"Also there won't be witnesses if we have to rough him up."

The look.

"Just let me do the talking. It would be best if I went in alone, but I know not to even try to talk you out of going."

"Damn right. I want answers. I want blood too, but answers will serve for now."

The drizzle turned to snow as we approached the Collective compound. Big, fat flakes as heavy as rain drops that fell straight to the ground and melted as soon as they hit. The kind of snow that makes traveling treacherous. That makes you want to stay home and curl up with a book, a fire, and a steaming mug of dwarven coffee. The thought of confronting the Bishop motivated me and kept me warm. There would be time to relax soon enough.

We stabled our mounts near the front gate and crossed the courtyard. The snow and rain slickened the cobblestones, but we had crossed worse, and this time, more than mere treasure propelled us onward.

Once inside, the sounds of our boots echoed down empty halls. I would have preferred for the stone hallways to have been carpeted in order to muffle our approach, but no matter, if he were guilty, the Bishop would have already assumed that we would confront him right about now. And I had no doubt about his guilt.

Braenoic didn't bother to knock. Instead she burst into the Bishop's office with enough zeal to rival my own burst-ins. Impressive. And scary. I never wanted to be the one who pissed her off.

Bishop Uthul sat at his desk reading through a stack of papers. He must have expected us, because he had guards stationed around the room. He glanced up as we skittered to a stop, but returned to his reading and waved for us to sit in the two chairs arranged before his desk.

Three guards in full chain mail holding halberds stood behind him, a few steps back from the desk. Another pair of halberdiers flanked the door we had just come through. Without a word, the nearest guard pushed the door shut.

I didn't like the situation. We stood in the middle of the room, almost in reach of the Bishop, if not for his expansive desk. Windows to our left allowed gray light to fill the room with even illumination. To our right, heavy curtains of faded velvet partitioned off the rest of the Bishop's chambers. From where we stood, the Bishop and his men had every advantage.

Brae didn't seem to notice, or else she didn't bother to acknowledge that there might be any problem. To her, only justice mattered. Powered by faith, she never doubted the outcome of the confrontation. I, on the other hand, lacked a god to back me up, so I took a more prudent approach and formed contingency plans.

Instead of sitting, Brae unwrapped the bundle she had carried on her back, to reveal one of the mercenary's swords. She threw it down onto the Bishop's desk where it scattered papers and slid to a stop. The guards flinched, but before they could do anything, the Bishop stopped them with a hand. I was pleased to notice a twitch in his fingers that betrayed his fear, even though his eyes hid it--I guess he was used to lying, but not used to having his life threatened.

"Do you know anything about this sword?"

"Ahhh, Braenoic. I see that you've managed to bring the gnome in for protection, and judging by this weapon, it appears you arrived just in time."

"Yes, my timing did seem to be rather lucky. I'd say that it was a fortunate coincidence that I arrived just before the mercenaries attacked, except that I don't believe it was a coincidence."

"Oh? How so?"

"You aren't surprised that mercenaries attacked? Zook, tell him."

"Absolutely. Here's the thing, Bish. Your man, Arty, wasn't the sort to hire mercenaries. For one thing, he didn't have the money, but even if he did, he wouldn't have hired them. He would have protected his identity and used his Occultist friends to do the dirty work." The finger twitch metastasized and spread to his spine, causing him to shift around in his seat. Soon, the realization that we knew about his guilt would reach his head, and then things would get interesting.

"You think someone else hired the mercenaries?"

"Yep. I had a chance to speak with Arty, just before he died." Watching the guilt work its way up through his neck was kind of fun. "He told me that he had a friend in the Collective. A friend who would protect him. You wouldn't happen to know who he referred to, would you?"

The guilt reached his eyes. I saw it. Braenoic saw it. And the Bishop saw us watching him. I tightened my grip on my cane and tensed my legs so that I could react quickly when the Bishop made his move.

The Bishop bowed his head into his hands. Sobs shook his whole upper body as they emerged. Then he pulled himself together and spoke from behind his hands.

"I'm so sorry."

Okay. I didn't expect the evil mastermind to break down and cry and then apologize. You never plan for that. Braenoic, on the other hand, seemed to expect his reaction. I guess criminals tend to confess and pray for mercy when confronted with a Paladin on the warpath.

"Bishop Uthul, you will come with me to the dungeon where you will await your inquisition." She didn't draw her sword, but she slipped her shield on to her arm to let him know she meant business.

"I'm so sorry."

"Bishop Uthul? Please stand up and come with me."

"He wasn't supposed to kill anyone. Don't you see?" More sobbing. "I only asked him to stop the automaton. When he told me about it, I knew that the clockwork makers had gone too far. It would be just like the magi and their golems."

"Sir, you should have turned Brother Artemus over to me right away. Not doing so has only made matters worse for you."

"I know." Sob. "I thought I could contain it. Keep it under control." He lifted his head and looked Braenoic in the eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"Your remorse--"

Braenoic stumbled into me, pushing me towards the windows. She craned her neck around to try to look at her back. She couldn't see the tail end of a crossbow bolt sprouting from her kidney area. As I held her, more tufts of feathers materialized on her back and chest. Each time a bolt punched through her armor, I felt the impact. I can't imagine the pain she felt, but Brae ignored it with dwarvish stoicism.

She pushed me into the wall near the window and crouched over me, protecting me from the crossbowmen with her shield. The clang of bolt on shield deafened me, but soon the initial flurry ended. Brae lowered her shield and drew her sword, muttering her prayers the whole time. I whipped my cane up to the ready and pulled a potion from my belt.

The Bishop had left the room during the barrage, and now we faced off with the five pikemen. More guards emerged from behind the curtain, dropping their crossbows and unsheathing swords as they came. Odds were that we would die.

A vicious blow from a halberd glanced off Brae's shield and smashed the window. Shards of glass rained down on us, but they were minor irritations compared to the attacking guards. Brae charged the closest halberdier and then I lost track of her. I had plenty to deal with on my end.

I ducked in close to my halberdier so that he couldn't get me with his enormous weapon. A fresh dose of pepper beetle extract took him out of the fight, but his friend attacked before I could prepare. He hooked the blade of the halberd

around my ankle and pulled my foot out from under me. I thumped to the ground, but rolled out of the way before he could complete his overhand attack.

I lobbed a flask of clockwork lubricant. With any luck, I'd catch more than one guard in its slippery puddle. The halberdier dodged the flask. Sigh. At least he glanced back to see where it landed, giving me an opening to charge him. He turned back before I could close the distance and swept the butt of his weapon up in an arc that caught me under the chin. He swung with enough force to knock me backwards and leave me lying on the ground, stunned. He twirled the weapon around for another overhand blow that would have butchered me like a sacrificial goat if not for the crossbowman who slipped on the lubricant and crashed into the halberdier's back.

As they struggled to get up while dealing with their armor, weapons, and each other, I hopped to my feet and applied my cane to their heads.

I turned to find and assist Brae. I found her pinned between a corpse and a wall by a pair of halberdiers. They kept her out of sword reach while the crossbowmen reloaded. Blood saturated her chain mail. Raw gashes complemented the crossbow bolts, and she grimaced every time she lifted her sword. I had to distract the halberdier so she could break free.

Before I could do anything, something punched me in the back and drove me to my knees. Time slowed down to a crawl. I looked at my stomach and saw a bulge appear. At first I felt no pain, but then it shot through me like lightning. The bulge erupted in a shower of blood and revealed a metallic triangle. The cane dropped from my hand as I watched, transfixed by the bolt emerging from my stomach. More blood spewed forth as the shaft continued to grow from the wound. After an eternity of pain, the fletching scraped its way out. When the feathers snapped back into shape, tiny droplets of blood flicked off, creating a red mist that swirled in the wake left by the bolt's passage.

My muscles failed me. I couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't do anything but stare at the bolt as it continued its journey to the stone floor.

Brae saw it as well. She forgot her Paladin-like control of her emotions and let loose with her family's ancient battle cry. I hadn't heard that since the old days, and it filled me with hope. The cry meant she'd given up on finesse and training and had embraced her true dwarven nature. The cry meant she'd channeled the thirst for carnage that centuries of barbaric strife amongst the dwarven clans had cultivated underground until only the finest of the natural born fighters remained. The cry meant salvation for us and death for our enemies.

But dwarven battle fury won't help when you've taken a crossbow bolt through the gut.

I couldn't do anything but watch as Brae threw her sword through the throat of one of the halberdier and bowled the other over. He managed to grab her shield as she hit him, dragging her to the ground. She slipped her arm out of the straps and left the shield behind as she ran to me.

Brae looked like a true dwarf out of the old tales. Sweat-drenched hair stuck out in all directions from the edges of her helm. Blood covered most of her body. I couldn't tell what belonged to her and what belonged to her enemies. Bolt shafts

protruded through her armor, and her cheek bore a gash that looked like a second mouth. Beautiful. My friend.

As she ran, the crossbowmen unleashed a new round of bolts. They struck her in the side and back, but she shrugged off the pain. One hit her in the thigh and slowed her down, but it couldn't stop her.

When she reached me, she swept me up in her arms, never slowing her pace. She cradled me like a baby and leapt through the broken window. I'd never seen her jump that high, but her rage must have lent her strength.

We tumbled through the air towards the ground a story below for what seemed like an eternity. Brae cushioned my landing, but she shouldn't have--I heard bones break.

Snow and the chill wind made me shiver. Or maybe it was the blood loss. I couldn't tell. It did wake me up in the same way a slap in the face will. I tried to pull myself up so I could help Brae, but my strength had flowed out of my gut along with my blood.

"Come on, Brae, we have to get moving." I unstrapped her helm and slid it off so she could get up easier.

"I can't make it, Zook."

"Nonsense. You are a Paladin. You can heal us. My potions can't do enough to save us."

She nodded and closed her eyes; focusing her faith, gathering her power. She tugged the gauntlet off her right hand, and then laid the hand on the hole in my stomach. Blue light as bright as the sun flared out from her hand.

I'd never felt such powerful faith-based healing. Next to it, my potions were like field rations compared to a seven-course feast. They got the job done, but there was no pleasure in it.

My wound closed in a heartbeat and with no pain. The fog in my mind blew away immediately, and my strength came back just as fast. All the while, my troubles eased the way they do when you get a massage from a trained professional. I had to fight the urge to lie there and bask in the love and comfort that infused me.

But I needed to help Brae, and we needed to get out of the Collective compound before the Bishop's men got to us.

"Now your turn."

Showing great effort, she shook her head. "Too weak."

We lay in an empty courtyard. Even if I did trust the priests at the Collective, there weren't any around to help us.

I slipped a healing potion out of my belt and poured it into her mouth for her. The potion fizzed as she drank, but her wounds were far too serious for the potion to make much of a difference. It did give her enough energy to lift her head and take my hand in hers.

"You need to get out of here, Zook." Pain flashed across her face with each word.

"I can't carry you, and they'll kill you if you stay. You have to find the power to heal yourself."

"I only had the strength to save one of us, Zook."

I looked her in the eyes and saw. That was it. She chose to save me over herself. Good old Braenoic. I choked back tears and held her close.

"Hold me, Zook."

"Always."

There was nothing else worth saying. She removed her family broach and pressed it into my hand, and then we embraced and stared into each other's souls. She smiled and I could see that she was happy as her soul left her body. Then I did cry.

But I couldn't wait around to grieve. Crossbow bolts struck the ground around me. I rolled away from Braenoic and into a sprint through a covered walkway. As I ran, I snugged my dark cloak in close so the bloodstains wouldn't show. The Bishop must not have raised the alarm, because no one stopped me.

My escape from the Collective compound back home was a blur, staccato flashes of images juxtaposed against the dirge that played in my heart. Once home, Lumo barricaded the front door, brought some food and beer to my room, and then left me alone. The perfect apprentice.

Since no one came to kill me, I figured that the Bishop didn't know where I lived. The mercenaries must have trailed Braenoic. That wouldn't last long, so I had to settle matters between us that night. Then I would have a chance to grieve.

I dug up my secret stash where I kept the last of my adventuring gear. I had a few precious vials of invisibility potions. I kept them around just in case, but I never used them because of the potential risks. There was a chance of inducing psychosis or permanent blindness, and some unfortunate souls who used the potions wound up with sexual side effects. But it was worth the risk.

After midnight, I snuck into the Collective compound disguised as a pilgrim. Once I was out of sight of the gate guards, I made my way to the Bishop's chambers. I quaffed the potion and managed not to gag on the awful taste, then recorked the vial and put it back in my belt. I held my hands up in front of my face and watched as they faded into nothingness. I'd only used invisibility potions a few times before, since they tend to leave me feeling sick and weak, like I'd caught the flu, but this time it would be worth it.

I'd worn my softest shoes, and left behind anything that could clank or otherwise make noise at home. I was a mouse, a ghost, a breeze flowing past unsuspecting guards down the hall and to the Bishop's chambers without notice. Two guards flanked the door, but I had no trouble opening up a vial of Sleep Vapor under each of their noses. I had to get it close enough so the volatile potion wouldn't diffuse away too quickly and lose its effect, but far enough away so that I could dose them both before they dropped into unconsciousness. Sometimes things just work out right.

Inside, the front chamber was empty. They'd cleaned up the blood and had even replaced the window. Someone had left the velvet curtain open, so I could see the couches and tapestries that decorated the sitting area. The Bishop didn't lead a life of poverty.

The door to his bedroom opened with nary a sound and revealed a private altar made of gold and silver, and encrusted with precious gems.

I ignored it and crept over to the four-poster bed draped with silk. The bishop lay on his back, covers clutched tight up to his face, but his face was all I needed.

I pulled out a Silence potion and palmed the cork. Drip, drip, drip. I let the droplets pelt his forehead one at a time until he sputtered and shook himself awake.

Then I poured the rest into his mouth, making him gag. He tried to yell, but no sound came out, which meant the potion had worked. I had about ten minutes before he could call for help. Plenty of time.

I jumped up and sat on his chest, and he panicked, but that was understandable--he'd been woken up to get a mouthful of liquid that froze his ability to talk, then he was pressed back into bed by an invisible gnome. I'd be freaked out too.

I slapped him a little with my invisible hand to get his attention. Once I had it, I delivered the speech I'd prepared.

"Listen up Bishop. You aren't safe anywhere. I can get to you anytime I want, and the next time you mess with me or Nerni or any of my friends, it'll be an untraceable poison, not a silence potion. And before you think about making any reprisals, remember that I know about you, Brother Artemus, and the Occultists. I also know how you murdered a Paladin of the Spiritual Collective. I've told my friends. They'll pass along the information to the Paladins and the City Watch if anything happens to me. I'm sure the City Council would love to have that information. Do you think Braenoic's men would like to know how she died?"

His eyes were wide with fright, staring through me, and I could see them twitch as his brain tried to figure a way out of his predicament.

"Remember, Bishop, I can get you, and you can't get me."

I pulled out a Sleep Vapor and popped the cap under his nose. He never saw it coming.

Once he rested peacefully, I placed the empty vial on his altar, so he'd see it in the morning and know he hadn't dreamed everything.

I searched his room and recovered both my cane and Brae's sword. Wrapping them in my cloak rendered them invisible. I made my way back out of the compound before my invisibility potion wore off, and I even managed to make it back home and crawl into bed before the after-effects hit me.

The old Zook Terpin would have just killed the Bishop, but the newer and wiser Zook knew better. Yeah, I'd grown soft, but not completely. I just preferred to keep the known enemies scared rather than to have to worry about new enemies I didn't know.

#

The next morning, after sleeping off the draining effects of the invisibility potion, I woke to find Lumo up and about and eating his way through the kitchen. He didn't remember much of what happened between fetching Melda and fighting the mercenaries, but other than that he seemed okay. I decided to let him regain his strength before filling him in on what happened. No reason to upset him.

I found a letter waiting for me from Magus Seebert. His rambling style made it hard to decipher, but the bottom line seemed to be that none of the magi had a grudge against Fud and Nerni, and the Arcane Association considered the matter closed. Great timing, those magi.

The only other loose end from this whole adventure, as far as I could recall, was Investigator Tillman. I needed to update him on what had happened with the Occultists, the Spiritual Collective involvement, and the Labor Guild. On the other hand, he hadn't really helped me very much. Why should I go out of my way to help him if he wasn't going to return the favor?

Screw it. The Harvest Festival would be here soon, and I had to get some work done. If he wanted to know what I knew, he could get up off his chair and come find me.

I left Lumo to his bountiful meal and headed to the basement lab. After everything that happened, I needed to clear my mind off of it all and get some distance so I could grieve properly. I needed to sort through my feelings about Braenoic. I needed to make some potions.

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Acknowledgements

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--Todd

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Bio

Todd is a molecular bioengineer who trains customers and writes how-to manuals for a laboratory automation company by day and a novelist by night (strictly speaking it's early morning). He holds a BS in Physics and a Ph.D. in Bioengineering. He spent three years as a biophysics professor and fencing coach at Whitman College before leaving academics and joining a biotechnology group at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. From there, he joined a laboratory automation company as the Field Technical Specialist, and after three years in the Sales and Marketing side of things, he switched over to the Customer Support side as an Applications Engineer/Technical Trainer.

Todd helped create the website for the [A Writer's Weekend](#) writing conference organization, and he has run a session on Science in Science Fiction at two conferences.

Todd grew up all over and currently resides in San Francisco. This is his second novel, but the first to see the light of day. He has three others in draft form and is currently writing his fifth.