

Of Gnomes and Azoth

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They say that it is good to be the king. I wouldn't know; I am only the king's advisor. But I'll tell you this: It is good to be living in the great gnomes kingdom of Gotrut under King Galvus Moghan's rule.

The fire flickered in controlled beats within the contained pit. The advisor watched the red flames with a careful eye as he told his story.

In my respectable one hundred and thirty-three years of serving the Moghan family I have seen a number of rulers come and go, but none have governed with as much fairness and stability as Galvus. None have allowed us to live in such comfort, and certainty. Gotrut is a city with good light, and clean water. There is very little crime here, and there is enough trade and commerce with the surface world to aptly feed our economy. We have jobs, and religion, a small, but respectable army, and all of the things we could possibly need right here in our fair city. Yes, it is good to live in Gotrut; it has been for nearly two hundred seasons under King Moghan's stable regime.

The fire illuminated the left side of the advisor's face, splitting him half in the light, and half in the dark. He chose the best piece of wood, and placed it confidently into the fire between two ash-ridden, blackened pieces. The flames neither rose, nor fell, nor did they spread or dwindle.

But, there are those who misconstrue stability for stagnancy. Some believe that he is stubborn — that he is resistant to change, and is unwilling to acclimatize our city to the changes of the maturing surface world. They say that he is a traditionalist who clings to the old ways, and that he is afraid to sink to lower depths (in the underworld, sinking to lower depths is a good thing, for all of you surface dwellers out there). They say that he is holding us back. I tell you this: those who believe that do not know the king as I do; they cannot know how hard it is to rule a society of people who burn with an innate, and unquestionably combustible inner fire — a yearning to grow, and to dig deeper, and to invent. We gnomes are the architects of the future, but we are also, by nature, quite self-destructive. If our passions are not contained we become volatile, destructive; we become drunk with the gods' nectar.

If the humans' god gave them stone tools, and then fire, and then the wheel, he did it in carefully planned out stages so that they would not destroy themselves. He babies them, and he cuddles them, and only when the time is right does he hand them a new toy to play with. Our god (as we all know from the scriptures) has no such restraint.

He held the poker in his hands, all the while looking for a place to stick it within the fiery logs. He nearly prodded the lowermost log with the iron spike, but something had held him back; a lone ember had escaped the pit, reminding him that by jabbing the bottom log, he might inadvertently lose control of the fire, and allow the embers to escape the protective barrier of rock. With a bit of willpower, he retracted the poker.

Our god is The Original Inventor; he is The Toy Maker, The Tinkerer. He gave us stone tools, fire, and the wheel all on the same day, and what did we do with it? We invented the world's first rolling flash bomb. Moghan understands our precarious nature all too well, and so he keeps us in check by decelerating our inner flames.

I'll tell you this: there was a time when King Moghan was not so immune to his own burning desire to sink to greater depths, and to appease his own insatiable lust for growth and development. There was a time when comfort, peace, and equilibrium had been thoroughly attained in Gotrut, and monotony began to rear its ugly head. The days bled into one another, and it became hard to differentiate one from the other. Like clockwork, and like the Hour and Minute Bridges that swivel around our Great Hall with strict adherence to its programmed schedule, the people would go about their predictable lives. On occasion you might notice one of us arriving ten minutes late for a shift change or a meeting, if only to stir things up a bit. Tedium had also slowed the king's heart, and the desire for novelty began to nip at him like the sabretoothed rats that climb into our machines and toss about their innards. I could tell that the itch was becoming too great for him to bear. I could see, during our afternoon council meetings, how he would tap his fingers against his throne, and how he would fidget with his cup, or his robe, or his crown, or with my cup, or my robe. He became short tempered, and easily distracted. "Let's dig out the eastern chiasm!" he said uncharacteristically on one ordinary afternoon, without ever having discussed the expansion of Gotrut in any great detail. Funny, isn't it... that we strive for order when chaos is all around us,

but when order is all around us, we strive for a bit of chaos?

Before he realized what he was doing, the advisor began to prod at the new log with his poker. The piece dropped to the side, unbalancing the fire and releasing embers everywhere.

And chaos is exactly what we got. I presume that most of you are not scholars in gnome history, and so I do not expect you to know what I mean when I refer to the story of Azoth. Be warned, this story is not for the faint-hearted.

We began digging out the eastern chiasm almost immediately, and we dug deep. We could have taken Galvus-like measured steps, charting through the lengthy bureaucratic labyrinth of paperwork before reaching any real depth. We could have taken the proper readings, or looked for signs of danger before we cut, and drilled, and dug our way into the new unknown, but by then our pretentious, self-heightening society of novelty seekers — led by the newly-converted heart of King Moghan — had become too consumed by our own internal fires to perceive what should have been obvious.

The first cavern yielded a few precious minerals; it was nothing out of the ordinary, but in the next cavern there were diamonds, and gemstones of all shapes and colours. Miners were returning with the oddest-looking stones; there were lazuli-encased rubies, and gold-infused iron, and I believe I can recall a silver-dusted black opal. Soon, the entire city began to talk of these wonders, and that only fuelled our desires to dig deeper.

Now that it is on its side, the log that had fallen over begins to burn quicker, and the flames rise.

At a lower depth we found more odd minerals and gemstones tightly packed into one long vein. Moghan gave the order to enlist more people to mine, and we were all too eager to comply — anything to avoid our previously dull existence living within an unchanging city. So many enlisted, in fact, that Gotrut's economy soon began to feel an effect. Production was down; with an excited mind on the caves, people were getting sloppy in their work, and shoddy materials were being made almost regularly.

The fallen log had fully ignited now, and it brought too much heat to one side of the fire, causing some of the lower, sturdier logs to burn brighter. They weren't meant to burn that fast — they could last an entire night at a moderate heat, but with the intensified flames they

might have about an hour left in them. The advisor gently poked at the disruptive log as he continued to tell

his tale, hoping to force it away from the other logs before it was too late to restore balance to the fire.

I tried to subtly convey my fears that his fervour had negatively affected the city during many of our afternoon meetings, but oftentimes he'd brush me off. "We'll just dig one layer lower to make sure that there aren't any more veins, and then we can return to our efficiently boring lives, my friend," he'd say with the sincerest of smiles. Of course, I knew addiction when I saw it, and I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't the slightest bit interested in knowing what lay beneath that last vein of riches we had found.

His attempt to reposition the fallen log failed; instead it only fell further into the fire. The advisor stood up now, knowing that he was in serious trouble of losing control of his creation. The fire wouldn't escape the pit — that wasn't the issue. The real dilemma was that he didn't have enough wood to last the night if this fire didn't calm down soon, and he couldn't simply let it die, for it was cold this night and he welcomed its warmth.

Our elation peaked when we discovered the largest deposit of precious minerals ever to be seen in the history of the gnomes in one of the lowest depths. By then King Moghan had all but forgotten about his stringent rules and his steadfast regulations. The city had all but forgotten about their trades with the surface world, production had come to a standstill, and when our people weren't mining the caves, they were celebrating, and drinking, and playing show-and-tell with one another. All that was left to do before Gotrut had completely succumbed to anarchy was to shed our clothes and our badges of rank. The king had unintentionally, but thoroughly thrown the city into disarray by allowing our passions to consume us, but before you judge him, know that it wasn't the prospect of wealth that had him burying his stringent codes and laws in his backyard. As I said, the king had been bitten (or I should say, 'smitten') by novelty, and his intoxication had become too great. With blurred vision he could not see that something about these caverns was amiss — none of us could. Our instincts told us that diamonds, and gemstones, and precious metals did not naturally form in such vast deposits, all strung together like construction rope, but we didn't want to listen. Even The Builder — the kingdom's sole seer and magic user — tried to warn us. He lives apart from us, high up on

the wall of Gotrut's great cavern, and at the time he was the only one who could see the danger we were placing ourselves in with his sober eyes. We ignored his warnings as well.

The smoke irritated the advisor's eyes as he tried to spread the logs out, knowing that a wider foundation would last longer than a higher one. His experience should have told him that it meant that more wood would be required in the long run to maintain the ideal temperature, but his only concern in the moment was to keep the fire from burning out too quickly.

We kept digging. We kept sinking to lower depths, proud as we were, but who knew that there was such a thing as sinking "too low"?

When I hear the stories about monsters taking people in the night, one by one, never truly showing their faces whilst preying on the fears of others, I cannot help but to laugh. That isn't how it works — at least, that isn't how Azoth did it. He came swiftly, violently, and without warning; he made his presence known. He was our god's way of saying, "that's enough, you've gone too far," before tossing a rolling flash bomb into our beloved city.

He tossed another log into the center of the pit.

The first and last thing I will ever remember about Azoth was that he had many teeth. He had teeth behind his teeth. He had teeth that protruded from his terrible maw, and jutting out of his

face and neck until they became thorny thistles that extended down his back. And his claws — those double-jointed nails that could tear rock to shreds like paper; I shall never forget about those claws. They still torment me in my dreams. I'm sure they still slash at King Moghan's dreams as well. To say that Azoth was a ferocious beast or a magnificent, destructive creature of the lower earth would be like calling an angry mountain lion a gentle dormouse.

The advisor had been distracted. He didn't realize that the log he had just thrown into the fire was not a log at all, but a firecracker — a sparkler rod that somehow got mixed up in the bunch. There was an explosion (albeit a minor one) and the angry fire grew. The advisor danced around the fire pit, poking and prodding at the logs to keep them contained. His only two concerns now were to keep the flames from escaping the pit, and to finish his story.

To say that he nearly decimated our city would not be an exaggeration — not in the least. He killed hundreds within hours. Azoth would squash our miners with any one of his six legs, or he would collapse our tunnels with his thorny tail, and I remember hearing a young cadet — Ryúkk, was his name — saying to me, “What kind of evil monstrosity is he?” as we crawled our way past the slower gnomes to safety.

The spike of his poker jabbed at one of the blackened logs, and it fell in two, collapsing onto the ash and creating a smoke of soot.

But I don't believe Azoth was evil; he was just... *nature*, I suppose. He behaved more like an earthquake, or the magma of a violent volcano than an angry beast. He acted completely without feeling; there was no malice in his impressive roar, and there was no hunger in his bite. Yes, he attacked us, but he could have just as easily avoided us. Perhaps he was just as bored as we were. I don't know — he had no eyes, you see; how could you perceive intent without being able to look into his soul through his eyes, right? I don't even know if a thing like that has a soul, but that's neither here nor there.

Smoke clouded much of the fire, while embers scattered about the air like errant wisps. The heat was enough to force him to step back, and he could now foresee an abrupt end for his creation.

Moghan must have realized what he had become — what he had allowed all of us to become — when he heard the collapse of the third layer all the way from The Great Hall our city's center. He must have cursed his lack of rigidity when the second layer collapsed. He must have looked out at his kingdom from his perched window as he waited for the sound of the first layer's collapse, while thinking about how empty the city looked; for nearly nine-tenths of Gotrut's people were in the caves at the time. He was probably thinking about where he had gone wrong, or where it all began. Surely, his desire to dig had come way before that afternoon that he impulsively declared, “let's dig out the eastern chiasm!” I'm sure in that time he must have also looked to Gotrut's wall, where The Builder's home was carved from the rock face.

The advisor reached for his bucket of sand, and scooped some of its contents into his hands. The sand would smother the fire where he needed it to, but it would also prevent him from resurrecting the flames should he wish to later on.

By the time I had returned to Gotrut's gates King Moghan

and The Builder were already on their way to face Azoth. I remember exactly how The Builder looked at the time; he was worried, though he did not appear to be scared. He walked with a stern stride with the king at his side, and I remember thinking it odd that his boots lifted the ground like he was treading in mud, yet the

ground was as solid as stone. I hardly gave it a second thought when I heard the poor screams of the gnomes behind us, followed by Ryùkk's bellowing voice. "Azoth is coming! Azoth is coming! He must be stopped!"

The king gritted his teeth and said, "Cadet! Turn and face him with us, for we now have the means to stop him."

King Moghan led all of us straight back the way we came. I could tell that he was determined to beat this horrific creature, yet he was also extremely shameful that he had awakened the beast in the first place.

"Help me!" We heard the cries of another cadet once we were back inside the tunnels that led to the first layer. We saw the cadet trying to lift a boulder that was clearly too heavy for any one person to lift — too heavy, even for ten people to lift. "There is someone trapped under there!"

"Cadet, step aside," said the king, but the cadet just kept trying to push the impossibly large boulder aside. "Cadet! What is your name?"

He stopped, and looked at the king with stunned eyes. "Umm... Zr'Gell. Zr'Gell Tegg."

The advisor sprinkled some of the sand over one area, and doused that part of the fire completely. It was a special kind of sand. It had been imported all the way from Abunon; he was grateful for having acquired it in a trade.

"Cadet Tegg, if you'd please step aside..." requested the king, and the cadet complied. Then, The Builder stepped forward — and I can tell you that I can count on one hand the amount of times I have seen him use his power. He opened his palm at the boulder, and as soon as he had, the boulder became indented in the shape of a hand. It began to crack from the center, and crumble away as if it was made of wet sand, and as the pieces fell they turned to dust. "Behold the power of The Builder," said King Moghan. With the boulder crumbling away, Zr'Gell dove into the sand and retrieved his fallen

comrade. The gnome — the lieutenant — was dazed, but otherwise no worse for wear.

Then came a mighty roar. The roar was so loud that stalactites fell from the cavern's ceiling. The roar was so great that each of us had to save our eardrums from bursting by covering our ears. Moghan ushered us on, towards the roaring creature, though I daresay I'd have given anything to avoid ever coming face to face with Azoth again.

The unwelcome firecracker sparked again, and it tossed the sand and wood all about. The advisor would need to reapply the sand in many areas for it to be effective. With a tilt of the bucket, he pillowed the sand over the edge of the fire pit, squelching the flames near the perimeter. He would need to work his way inward, spreading the sand towards the fire's center, but the fire was hot and it made it difficult to get close enough to properly distribute the sand.

We hurried through another winding tunnel until we reached the first layer where Azoth stood, facing us, and measuring us up. I remembered many minutes passing before anything happened, but others say that it happened instantly. Azoth charged as he tore the ground with his many claws. I fell back, but most ran. The king backed away, and I believe that Zr'Gell actually shot at the beast with his measly little side-arm, but The Builder stood his ground. He lifted his arms, and conjured up a large metal barrier between he and Azoth. The barrier looked like a metallic dam that could keep an entire ocean from seeping in. But Azoth was greater than any ocean. He quickly tore through the dam with his teeth. The Builder fashioned another dam, and then he dropped the ceiling on the creature, and then he turned the ceiling to metal.

In one impulsive and fearful moment, the advisor tossed the remaining sand into the center of the fire. The highest flames quickly abated, leaving only tiny flickers of light to poke through the sandy surface of the pit. The advisor took in a deep breath of smoky air. He looked into his bucket; only about an inch of sand remained. He was upset with himself for losing control of the fire, and for not noticing the three-shot firecracker that had somehow crept its way into his bundle of logs. Ready to continue his story, he began placing new logs over the old ones.

And then, he remembered something: the three-shot firecracker had only shot twice thus far, meaning...

For a moment I thought it was over. Azoth had been

completely encased in a metal prison, and much like plaster, the metal had seeped into his joints and had prevented him from moving. But Azoth was greater than any prison. I could see the metal bending and warping away as Azoth grew. “Back, now!” said The Builder just as one of the solid pieces bent outwards and caused the rest of the cavern to collapse. Had it not been for The Builder’s quick hands and his ability to disintegrate rock, we would have all been buried alive. We ran back towards Gotrut, and we did not look back.

“Where is The Builder?” asked Zr’Gell once we reached Gotrut’s welcoming arches, but we could hear the roar, and the collapsing of many tunnels, and the shattering of steel. The tunnel coughed out a dust cloud as the floor shook, and each of us backed away. We weren’t prepared for the explosion as Gotrut’s cavern wall burst, and Azoth tore through. The Builder had ridden one of the rocks that spouted from the wall, and was now behind us. He was cut and bruised in many places, but I tell you that he is the most resilient gnome I have ever met — especially for a person in his second century. His body ceased to bleed, and his bruises faded as he marched past us, towards the angry creature.

The advisor fell back as the firecracker let out its final (and most powerful) shot, scattering the sand from Abunon, and setting both the old and new logs aflame with a blazing anger. The fire grew thrice its original size, and its embers even grazed the advisor’s stockpile of logs, threatening to set them aflame as well. He had only a handful of sand left, and the fire would burn itself out in minutes flat if he did not do something about it.

“Enough!” called The Builder, and he slashed at it with an imaginary sword. Not so imaginary, for Azoth’s proud chest had become indented as though a giant blade had slashed him there. Azoth didn’t cry in pain so much as in astonishment. Perhaps this was the first time anything had ever injured it before. The wound healed quickly. “You leave me little choice, rock bear! I was hoping to deter you from coming here, but now I shall have to destroy you!” He swiped again, and a new scar appeared on his face. It healed.

Azoth exposed all of his teeth now as he readied his hind legs to pounce. He leapt, and he bared all of his claws and teeth at The Builder, and this — I tell you — is the part that I shall never forget. The Builder stood his ground, and caught Azoth by his fore paws as the creature tried to squish him between his palms. With arms spread out he became locked

with the ferocious beast. He should have been flattened by Azoth's clapping paws, or torn to shreds by his double-jointed claws. Instead The Builder held onto Azoth's palms, and his skin resembled Azoth's skin. His feet resembled the ground he stood on, and somewhere in the middle he was still gnomes. Azoth's palms began to disintegrate — it was the work of The Builder — but the healed almost as fast. Azoth clasped harder, but more of his paws disintegrated in the process. Azoth bit down on The Builder, but his teeth shattered and turned to dust. New teeth replaced the old teeth.

Finally, Azoth relented. Tired of the stalemate, he backed away slowly. The Builder did not move.

The advisor had an idea, and if it worked it might just save his fire. He quickly dampened a log with some water, and then coated it with some of the remaining sand. He tossed the log into the fire. There was a sizzle and a lot of smoke, and the flames had somewhat dwindled. He reached for another log and treated it in similar fashion before throwing it too into the fire. He only had enough sand to coat four logs, but it was enough. Water-soaked, and sand-covered, the four logs behaved like moderators that smothered the fire just enough, whilst providing it with more fuel once the water had dried. He had a sustainable fire once more.

When Azoth turned away, Ryúkk removed his sidearm and pointed it at the beast. “No!” said The Builder quickly, and his sidearm rusted and corroded in Ryúkk's hands. “Leave him alone, and he shall leave us alone.”

We never saw Azoth again.

It took time to find everyone; luckily Azoth was more interested in showing his power than employing it, and so most survived his attack. The Builder helped us to seal off the many layers that had led us to Azoth's lair, though by then the mighty beast had abandoned it, perhaps in favour of a more discreet home. It was surmised that the string of oddly mixed minerals and gemstones had come from Azoth, that perhaps they were his excrements — like the webbing from a spider.

In a few weeks' time the people of Gotrut had returned to their regular, mundane routine. The Builder had returned to his isolated home on the outskirts of Gotrut, and the king and I fell back into our scheduled meetings and procedures. Once in a while I can see him tapping at his throne, or fidgeting with his robe, or his cup, or his crown, and yes... he still fidgets

with my robe and cup. But, he has learned to control his inner fire — *our* inner fires, or should I say that he has learned to regulate its growth? We still explore, and build, and invent, but we do so now at a scheduled pace. Each week Gotrut is allowed one new invention, and before it reaches the public eye that invention is critiqued, and scrutinized with safety and ethics in mind. If it does not pass each of the king's rigorous standards, the invention is rejected and may be slated for reform. Each season we may explore one new cavern, but not before the cavern is properly scanned, and tested. You see: we must moderate our innermost passions, not suppress them — that was Moghan's mistake prior to Azoth's arrival. We gnomes were born to create, and to recreate; we are inventors, and toy makers, and tinkerers. Suppression leads only to combustion. With a schedule and a mediated incline, we can eventually burn as fierce as the planet's core without leaking like a volcano. We can sink to the greatest depths. We can become a great people.

The advisor kept a sharp eye on the fire, remembering not to poke it too much or add too many logs to it. He sat again, basking in the warmth that would last him the night as he finished his tale.

Save for the awakening of Azoth, King Moghan has never led us astray. Moghan is a good king, and Gotrut is a great city. Under The Builder's protection we shall thrive, and we shall continue to light up the world with our controlled, inner fire — that I am sure of.

