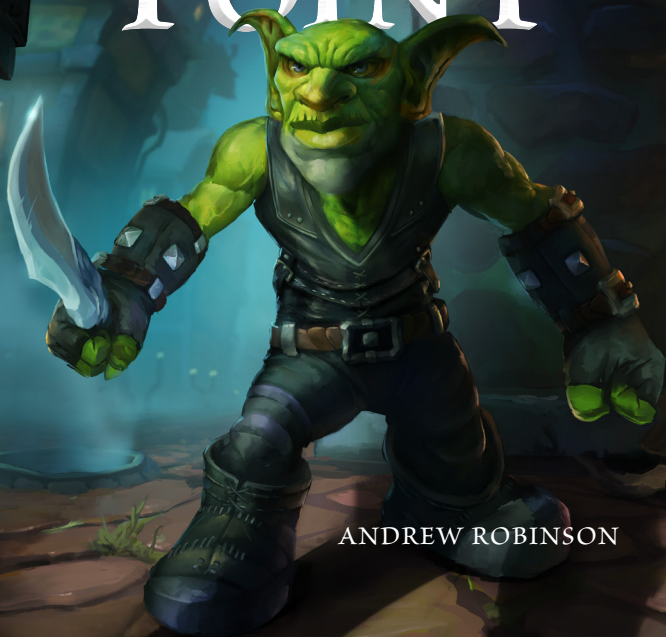


WORLD
WARCRAFT
THE WAR WITHIN

THE TIPPING POINT



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Vivi Vendklaxxon dug in as her ramshackle trike groaned beneath her. Getting through this pass was always the hardest part of the run. She downshifted, grinding gears, and—not for the first time, or even the twentieth—curled the mechanics, the bosses who refused to pay for proper repairs (let alone new parts!), and the world in general. She *hated* driving cargo on the graveyard shift. The *pop* of a tire blowing was the last straw; she eased the limping vehicle over to the side of the road.

Vivi climbed down the trike, using rungs she'd installed herself, then hopped lightly to the ground. She examined the flat and was dismayed to find a large metal caltrop embedded in the tire.

"Ah, blast it," Vivi muttered. She spun around, only to find herself face-to-face with three tall figures, their faces hidden by black masks.

"Ooh, a flat tire," said the apparent leader. "Most regrettable, on a desolate stretch of road like this."

"No kidding," Vivi spat. "What luck you're here to put the spare on for me." She sensed the smile behind the mask.

"I don't suppose we will," he admitted. "What's your name?"

Vivi goggled for a moment, reaching for her wrench. What were they playing at? “Grizelda,” she grunted. “And if you’re not gonna help me, it’s probably best you get on your way. Dangerous out here for travelers.”

“That it is,” he said, not unkindly.

She looked up at him. This could end very badly for her, but she’d worked her way out of tough situations before, even with pirates and highwaymen. “Do I get to know *your* name?”

“Not tonight, I think,” he replied.

“Well, ‘Not Tonight,’ if you’ll kindly shove off, I’ll fix this *myself* and be on my way.”

The masked figure laughed merrily, waving one hand, shaking his head. “I think not.” Then he stopped, suddenly serious. “What’s that you’re towing, *Grizelda*?”

“Pickled peppers,” Vivi snarled.

The other two figures climbed into the back of the cargo tow and wrestled a barrel to the ground. One used a crowbar to open it, revealing row upon row of small explosives packed neatly in straw.

The leader looked over the contents, then back at Vivi. “These peppers must pack quite a punch.” He produced a long dagger. “Hold out your hand, please.”

Vivi paled. “I-I didn’t know,” she stammered. “Please don’t kill me!”

“*Kill* you? I’d prefer to avoid that if possible. Grizelda—if that *is* your name—I like you. That said . . .” He almost gently pricked her palm with the point of the blade; she looked at the tiny drop of blood it produced and suddenly felt woozy. The leader caught her as she lost consciousness and laid her gently in the seat of her trike. “We can’t have you following us.”

The bandits removed their masks and set about the task of hauling the shipment of explosives—each earmarked “V.C.”—to their own nearby cart.

“Info was spot-on,” his first companion remarked. “Nice work, Shaw. Good to have informants you can trust.”

“Didn’t think that was possible in the Undermine,” the second said with a laugh.

Mathias Shaw smiled thinly. “We’ll certainly put this to good use. And anything that puts a wrench into the Venture Company’s operations is a good thing for Stormwind. With any luck, this will help destabilize the trade princes’ hold on the Undermine too.

Infighting will disrupt their supply chain.”

The second agent shook his head. “If one trade prince falls, someone else will take their place,” he said. “There’s always another shark.”

Shaw hefted another barrel. “We’ll see.”



The Undermine was always a little too cold, and usually a little too dank, for Renzik’s comfort. He cricked his neck to one side, adjusting his long coat that was stiff with blades. Was it the most comfortable thing to wear? Honestly, no, but experience had taught him that the more weapons you had on your person, the more likely you were to live another day down here. He took a bite from his sandwich.

Renzik grunted at one of the two street urchins who stood looking up at him. The young goblins were both a little too skinny, but he knew the hunger in their eyes wasn’t just for food; he’d lived in their shoes for years. “So whatcha got?”

“Heard Skunkie Splitflange was tossin’ dice with the Slackhouse boys today.”

“Did he win?”

“Does he ever?”

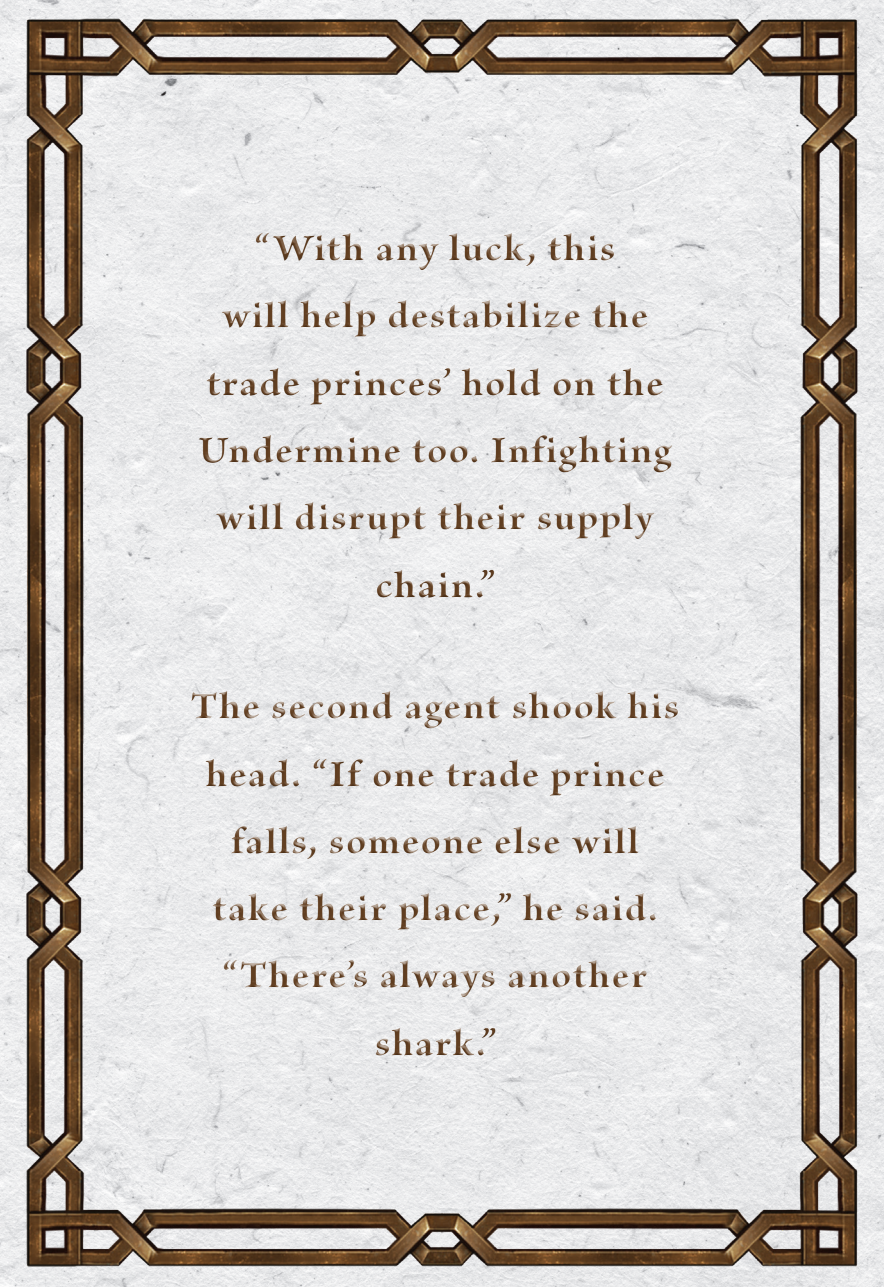
Renzik frowned. “He owes Trade Prince Gloxscorn five large.”

“Yeah, we know.” The second kid—a scrawny little girl, couldn’t’ve been more than nine—juttled out her jaw. “That’s why we ran to tell ya.”

Renzik nodded. “Good job, Spatter, Jinzi.” He divided the remains of his sandwich and handed both halves to the kids. As they stuffed their faces, Renzik dropped a few coins into their outstretched hands. “Go find out where he’ll be tonight, but keep a low profile.”

They nodded and moved quickly down the street, ducking into an alley, no doubt to count their take. Renzik allowed himself a faint smile.

“Aw, ain’t that adorable,” came a gravelly voice. Renzik had noticed the two midlevel brutes from the Krackslagger cartel—Bask Topscrew and Gizgank Brokebolt—approaching, but he didn’t want to pay them more attention than they deserved. “Shivvie’s playin’ with kids. What’s wrong, Renzik, you miss your mommy? You goin’



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soft on us?”

Renzik's eyes narrowed as the two buffoons shared a laugh at his expense. His fist flashed out, meeting Bask's crooked nose with a *crunch*, and the bigger goblin fell to the greasy pavement, groaning in pain. Gizgank turned on Renzik but pulled up short at the shiv that had almost magically appeared in Renzik's other hand, now pressed hard against Gizgank's cheek. Renzik smiled unpleasantly.

“I seem *soft* to you?”

Gizgank gulped and shook his head.

“Because if I'm getting that reputation, I can think of two actions I could take right now to correct it.”

“Okay, okay,” Bask groaned as he staggered to his feet. “Don't gotta take it so personal. Just came to deliver a message. Boss is callin' in all the captains.”

Renzik wondered what could be so important, but he knew it couldn't be good. “Okay, you delivered your message. Scram.”

The brutes scowled but left, Bask holding a dirty kerchief to his bloodied face. “Ya broke my nose again,” he grunted.

“Did you a favor,” Renzik shot back. “*Again.*”

He watched them turn the corner before sheathing his makeshift weapon. Dummies like that you could see coming a mile away, but nobody seemed to understand the value of street kids. As far as the Undermine was concerned, they were either a minor nuisance or completely invisible, which made them useful.

Renzik knew that truth from harsh experience. He'd spent most of his childhood as an orphan on the streets of the Undermine. He remembered the day his parents had been murdered for what little they had. The monsters who did it barely offered a word of consolation. *Nothin' personal, pipsqueak. This is just how it goes. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, so ya better learn to eat.*

He spent the next few years of his life begging, stealing, and worse. He learned to give no mercy and to expect none in return. And he started to carry a shiv—his last line of protection on the mean streets. His “activities” caught the eye of a local captain who, catching him pilfering from a cashbox one night, was impressed with the kid's “moxie.” Rather than ending Renzik, the captain put him to work.

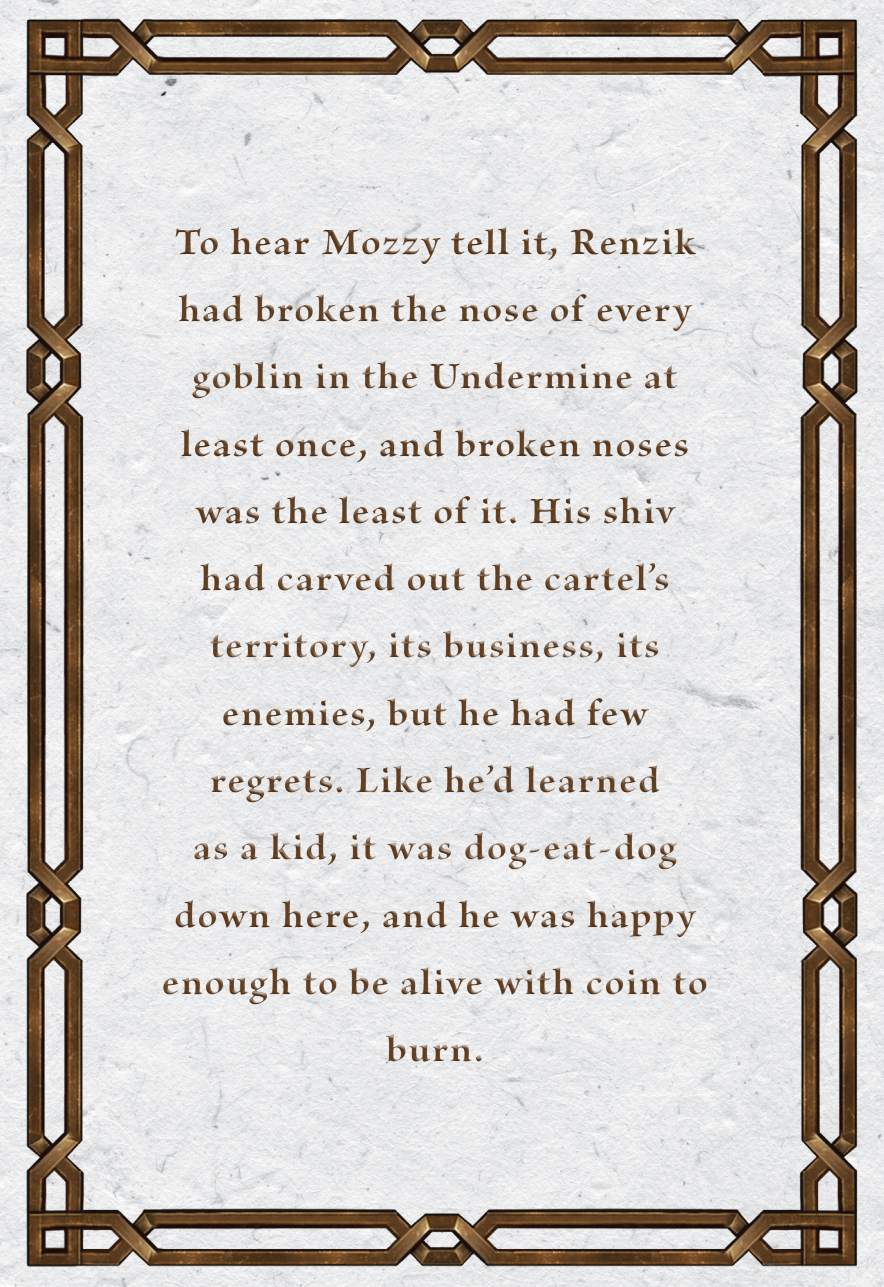
As Renzik grew, older goblins would send him on increasingly dangerous errands: stealing, running contraband, sometimes knocking out a guard. When he succeeded, he ate. He earned a reputation as a strong fist and a reliable knife in the dark. Eventually, though, he got caught filching from one of the trade princes and was sent to work in the mines. The brutal conditions toughened him and made him even stronger.

Eventually, Renzik was recruited into the cartel of a local trade prince, Mozzy Gloxscorn. His childhood had taught him everything he needed to survive in the Undermine; few knew the back alleys and sewers better than he did. They called him “the Shiv”—for both his use of the improvised weapon and his ability to improvise himself—and he quickly rose through the ranks from lookout to runner, to brute, to enforcer. Eventually, he caught Mozzy’s eye personally, and the trade prince named him a captain, part of his inner circle—a “made goblin,” so to speak, the bloody fist of the Krackslagger Cartel.

To hear Mozzy tell it, Renzik had broken the nose of every goblin in the Undermine at least once, and broken noses was the least of it. His shiv had carved out the cartel’s territory, its business, its enemies, but he had few regrets. Like he’d learned as a kid, it was dog-eat-dog down here, and he was happy enough to be alive with coin to burn.

That said, he had to admit he’d gotten a little tired of it all. Never a moment’s peace; never knew who he could trust. He took some measure of pride in his skills—they were the reason he was still suckin’ air on a daily basis—but lately the work was just . . . *stale*. Somewhere deep down, he knew this life was ugly, and he wished he’d walked a different road to get here. And the thing he almost never dared admit to himself: he did indeed miss his mother. He’d never known a tender moment since the day she was murdered. He paused for a moment. *Did* he have a soft spot for those street kids? All he knew was, no kid deserved this life. And that little flame of injustice that had kept his heart beating all these years had never quite gone out.

He shook himself out of his reverie. It was being the best and most ruthless that had gotten him where he was. And he recognized that—albeit through force of will and violence—the trade princes had managed to create some stability in the Undermine, where there used to be only chaos. This was how things were done down here, and they would likely never change.



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He started toward headquarters, wondering what Trade Prince Gloxscorn wanted.



Renzik sat uncomfortably at a long table with a dozen other high-level goblins. He hated meetings like this, partly because he hated not knowing what he was going into, but also because he didn't much care for people—particularly this group, none of whom he could trust as far as he could throw 'em.

Trade Prince Mozzy Gloxscorn, dressed in his trademark silks, stalked around the table, holding a rough club. “*Another* shipment got disrupted,” Mozzy seethed, slamming the club on the table.

Several of the captains flinched. Renzik actually relaxed a little—this had nothing to do with him. The trade prince's shipping business was none of his concern—unless he got sent to strong-arm a customer who hadn't paid on time.

“This time it was mithril frag bombs!” Mozzy snarled as he dragged the spiked club across the carved wooden surface. “And the whole shipment was stolen!”

“Who'd be dumb enough to steal explosives from you, boss?” wondered one of the captains.

“Maybe *YOU*, Flumbuck,” growled Mozzy, shoving the end of the club into Flumbuck's brand-new green leather jerkin. The spikes penetrated the shiny leather—and Flumbuck's chest.

“No, sir,” came the gasped response. “Never!” Blood dripped down the leather, and Flumbuck's eyes bulged.

Renzik scowled. There were two kinds of people in the Undermine, the smart and the stupid, and Flumbuck . . . was not smart. Renzik had seen it coming, had known the boss was going to lash out, partly because he had to keep control of his people, but also partly because the trade prince was just violent and vindictive. It wasn't like Renzik had any affection for Flumbuck, but whatever his faults, the captain was as loyal as a dog.

Renzik cricked his neck to one side to cover his discomfort just as the door opened and a brute ushered in a diminutive female goblin.

“Trade Prince Gloxscorn, sir? This driver's got somethin' ta tell ya.”

Mozzy turned to the driver. “What?”

Vivi Vendklaxxon nodded. “I was drivin’ the trike that got bushwacked. It was three humans, sir. Men. Tall, all dressed in black. They knew what I was carrying—even though I didn’t!”

“Why didn’t you fight back?” Mozzy demanded.

She looked at him. “Against three armed robbers? Why weren’t there guards along?”

“*IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A SECRET!*” he screamed. He calmed himself. “I want every pirate in the area rounded up. Mozzy Gloxscorn can’t look soft. Make an example out of ’em.”

Vivi coughed. “Beg your pardon, sir, but . . . I don’t think it was pirates.”

“Oh, really?” the trade prince sneered.

“Too . . . polite. Well spoken. And frankly? Pirates in these parts tend to smell rank—sea rot and dead fish. These guys smelled clean.”

Mozzy paused to take this in as the captains rushed to redirect the trade prince’s attention.

“Could be a competitor hornin’ in on your affairs, sir.”

“Could be the buyer, runnin’ an end around!”

Mozzy turned a vicious eye on his captains.

“Or . . . it *could* be one of *you*, lookin’ to line your pockets.”

Furious denials ensued. Renzik looked around carefully at them all.

Mozzy barked with a harsh laugh. “Who knows—it could even be someone from the Alliance lookin’ to score some freebies. One thing I know for sure: some snitch in my organization is passing information to someone who’s robbing me!”

The captains looked around uneasily, casting suspicious glares at one another. *Could* it be one of them?

“And *that* can’t happen. Who. Knows. Why?” Mozzy looked at Flumbuck, who was trying to stanch his wounded chest. “Flumbuck?”

The wounded goblin looked up, pale. “It’s b-bad for business?”

“*IT’S BAD FOR BUSINESS!*” Mozzy roared, swinging the club and taking splinters out of the table. “Explosives is our most lucrative operation! If any other trade

princes think I'm weak, they might try to take me down. And if I go down, you mooks go down with me! Everything we've built is at risk!"

The captains assured Mozzzy that they were innocent of treachery, wrongdoing, or incompetence, and promised to help him get to the bottom of this horrible malfeasance. "No," Mozzzy growled. "Mind your businesses. Until we got more explosives ready to roll, you all are gonna have to pick up the slack. Now get out!"

The table cleared with astonishing speed, a brute hauling Vivi out of the room just in front of Renzik. As Renzik approached the door, Mozzzy stuck the club out in front of him.

"Have a seat, Renzik."

Renzik looked at the club blocking his path, then up at Mozzzy. "Sure, Mozzzy. What can I do for you?"

Mozzzy laid the club gently on the table. "*You're gonna root out the snitch.*"

Renzik was surprised. "Me? I'm an enforcer. This is a job for a brains guy."

"You don't need brains for this." Mozzzy grimaced. "And frankly, you're about the only goblin here I can trust."

Renzik nodded.

"Plus, y'know. You got a talent for pounding heads and getting things I need—money, information . . . *confessions.*"

Renzik shrugged. "Whatever you say, Mozzzy."

Mozzzy smirked. "When you catch 'em, let 'em know their usefulness to this organization is terminated."

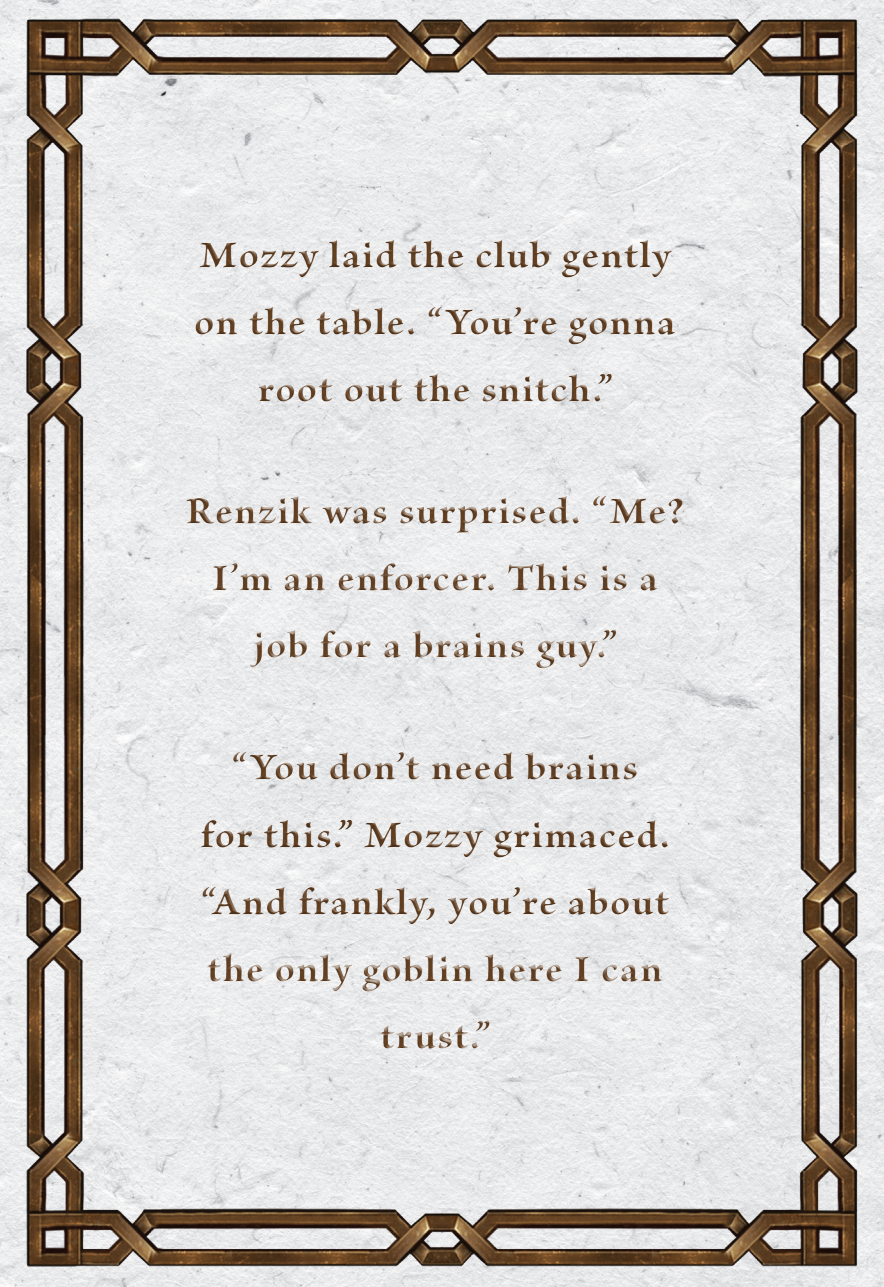


In the cellar beneath Trias' Cheese shop, Mathias Shaw pored over a complex map, frowning.

"What's this, then?" asked Elling Trias, setting down a stein of ale and a plate of aged cheddar.

"Working on how to get my informants out of the Undermine."

Trias cocked an eyebrow. "Why would you do that? An informant is only useful if they're in a position to gather information."



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“Yes, but they’re also of no use to me *dead*.”

“Ah. Things took a nasty turn after your raid?”

“Indeed,” Shaw replied. “Trade Prince Gloxscorn has his entire territory on lockdown, looking for the traitor in his midst. My informants are pretty sure someone’s going to find out about them.”

“Not sure why that’s your problem,” the Master of Cheese offered. “All good things must end.”

“That’s awfully cynical.” Shaw fixed Trias with a steady gaze. “They’ve put themselves at risk, they’ve given me good information, and Light help me, I can’t just let them perish. If you had any idea how rare it is for a goblin to be willing to risk everything for an uncertain shot at a better world . . .”

“Vanishingly so, I imagine.”

Shaw turned his gaze to the floor. “I’ve spilled plenty of blood in my career—or allowed it to be spilled while I stood aside. I find that doesn’t sit well with me here.”

“Why, Mathias, you sound almost . . . idealistic.” Trias smirked.

Shaw scowled. “These people aren’t criminals. They’re just looking to break the cycle.”

He studied the map, then looked up at Trias. “Besides, it’d be far better for the Alliance if they’re not caught and forced to confess to helping Stormwind steal their best armaments. The less anyone knows about our dealings, the better. Wouldn’t you say?”

Trias sipped his ale. “You make a compelling point. So. Given that SI:7 doesn’t exactly have anyone who can . . . enter the region unnoticed, as it were, how do you plan to extract them?”

Shaw knitted his brow, plotting his mission on the map. “Isn’t that the question.”



Renzik was getting a little frustrated. This assignment wasn’t exactly playing to his unique set of skills, and his reputation tended to precede him. Outside the kids he used, he didn’t have informants so much as folks he threatened. But at least he had made progress. He’d started with an overseer in a nearby sulfur mine, who had quailed

at Renzik's threat to put him *in* the mine and had immediately named a mine worker who had been "stirring things up."

In her ramshackle hut, Fritzi Strifetalker looked defiantly up at Renzik. "Are you nuts? I wouldn't know anything about that!"

Renzik gazed down at her. "Overseer said you're a troublemaker."

She sighed. "If organizin' miners for better working conditions and a living wage is *makin' trouble*, then sure."

"So you *didn't* tell the mine bosses that you could make things difficult for them?"

"I meant I'd call for a work stoppage." She gave Renzik a plaintive look. "I don't wanna die, but there are too many workers down here who *are* dying, whether they're getting hurt or sick, kept poor. The bosses just want you to make an example of me to stop us working together."

That gave Renzik pause. His own time in the mines was not something he remembered fondly, and there was no reason to think workers' situations had improved since then.

"Besides," Fritzi continued, "even if I *wanted* to do it, explosives gotta be chemically blended, refined, packaged; the shipments would be charted and timed. All that's way above my pay grade; try someone who knows about schedules."

She made good points. He nodded his thanks and turned to go, then paused and tipped a lamp off a table, breaking it.

"Hey! What was that for?" Fritzi demanded.

"Sorry," Renzik sighed. "I got a reputation to keep."



Renzik stopped outside a surprisingly well-kept cottage on the lower east side. He'd strong-armed the cartel's dispatcher into naming a driver who he'd said had complained about low pay and long hours. Deep down, Renzik thought it sounded like management was using him to get rid of another potential rabble-rouser, but he had to check it out.

He knocked on the door; moments later, a young female goblin opened it, looking up at him nervously. "Yes?"

“Beezle Gnarflux?” he asked.

A young man joined her. “I’m Beezle,” he said, putting himself between her and Renzik.

Renzik appreciated his bravery, protecting her like that. “Name’s Renzik,” he said. He didn’t even notice the blood drain out of their faces. “Mind if I come in?”

The couple silently moved aside, and he stepped heavily into the small house.

The room Renzik found himself in was . . . honestly, pretty nice—not luxurious by any means, but clean and neat—and what they had was better quality than most working goblins he’d dealt with. There was even a decorative plate on the wall, nicer than he’d expected they could afford. The couple stood there, the wife wringing her hands anxiously. He examined the plate—definitely not goblin work. He turned back to them. “That’s beautiful. You buy that in the Undermine? On a driver’s salary?”

“It was a . . . gift,” the wife offered.

“Uh-huh. What’s your name?” he asked her.

“S-Seersa,” she stammered.

Renzik cocked his head at her. “You seem nervous, Seersa. Why’s that?”

She looked at him as if he’d said she was stupid. “You’re . . . Renzik. The Shiv. No one wants you knocking on their door.”

Beezle put his arm around her shoulder. “Seersa, don’t—”

Renzik waved him off. “That’s actually pretty reasonable. A little *hurtful*, but reasonable.” He squared off to them. “So. Beezle. You know why I’m here.”

Beezle looked more nervous. “I do?”

“You’re a driver for the cartel.”

“Yeah . . .”

“So being a driver, you must have heard that some shipments have gotten hijacked lately.”

“No, I hadn’t. Who’s stupid enough to steal from Mozzy?”

“Funny—that’s what I thought when they told me.”

Renzik produced the shiv, and the couple took an involuntary step backward, the wife flickering a quick look to the back room.

“Here’s the thing,” Renzik said. “Someone on the inside’s been selling

information to pirates—or rival merchants, or heck, maybe even the Alliance—about those shipments. There’s evidence that points to you. All of this will go easier for you if you confess.”

“Easier . . . or *faster*?” Beezle asked.

The shiv flashed out and nicked Beezle’s ear; the goblin put a hand up, trying to stop the blood flowing.

Renzik shrugged. “Both, I guess.”

Now Seersa stepped between Renzik and her husband. “He *couldn’t* know anything. They don’t even tell him when his gigs are coming up until the last minute.”

Renzik paused. This was giving him a headache. “Okay, let’s say that’s so. Let’s say hubby’s not involved. Who do *you* think’s behind it?”

At this point, he realized, any lead could help, no matter who it came from.

The couple offered ideas, speaking over each other in their haste. “Who else wants it?”

“Who’s the buyer? Maybe *they’re* telling pirates about it—pirates split the take with the buyer, who doesn’t have to pay for it.”

“Maybe it’s someone in the refinery, trying to establish their own connections.”

Beezle finished: “They always say, ‘Follow the money,’ right? So who handles the money?”

Renzik considered all this, then carefully sheathed his blade. “Huh. This was more useful than I thought. Thanks. You’re both smart. Anything pans out, I’ll even tell the boss how helpful you were.”


“Not necessary.” Seersa smiled uncomfortably. “We’re just happy to help.”

Renzik smiled back, pointing a finger at her. “See? Smart.”

The couple maintained their grimaces as he walked out the door, then looked at each other, dread in their eyes.



Renzik led off with a punch to the nose. It was hardly original, but it sparked cooperation nine times out of ten.



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“Are you *kidding*, Renzik?” wheezed Specs Clinkstack from the thick crocolisk hide that covered the floor of the bookkeeper’s lavish office. Renzik stood over the aging goblin, cracking his knuckles.

“You’re the one behind the explosives going missing, Specs. All the shipments. Admit it.”

The bookkeeper snarled as he climbed shakily to his feet, fumbling for his spectacles, which had miraculously not been broken by Renzik’s punch. “What proof do you have of that spurious accusation?”

“What’s spurious?”

“It means ‘worthless,’ you ignorant ox!”

Renzik decided to ignore that insult for the moment. He’d have plenty of time for retaliation. “You control the books, Specs. You’re the one who runs all the operations for the boss. You know about the mining, the assembly, the shipping schedules, everything. And look at this place. I’ve never seen an office so fancy—except maybe the boss’s own house.” He leaned over the frail older man. “Where’s all the money *come* from, Specs? It’s gotta be you.”

“You . . . idiot.”

Renzik didn’t care for that one bit, but the bookkeeper continued, actually advanced on *him*. He could see why that made people uncomfortable.

“Of course I have nice things! Mozzy pays me handsomely. He *values* me.” Specs turned to a table that displayed photographs of him with various higher-ups in the organization—either working or enjoying celebrations—and picked up an accounting ledger. He opened it on his desk and thrust it at Renzik. “I keep *impeccable* records of exactly where everything came from. I know I would be the first logical suspect: I live with my head in the bookworm’s mouth! How stupid would I have to be to give up *all this* just to steal from Mozzy? I’m the one who suggested he use *you* to find the snitch!” he almost screamed.

Renzik looked at the ledger; what little he knew of numbers seemed to indicate that the bookkeeper’s outrage was justified. He sighed. He had hit yet another dead end, and truth be told, he didn’t know where to go from here. He was tired of this game. Tired of it all, actually. Defeated, he closed the ledger and put it back on the table. He glanced

at the photos—photos were uncommon around here—and paused. He picked one up, taken in this very office, of Specs toasting with Mozzzy and several of his captains. In the background was a female goblin, slightly out of focus.

Renzik got a small tickle in the back of his brain. He held up the photo to the bookkeeper and pointed at the figure. “Who’s that?”

Specs squinted at the photo, pulled his eyeglasses on, then turned away dismissively. “That’s just one of my secretaries, Seersa.”

Renzik placed the photo carefully back on the table and left.



Renzik was in a bad mood as he headed back toward the lower east side. He’d kinda actually liked that young couple, and they’d played him. In fact, he realized he hadn’t even broken anything when he’d left their house. Was he losing his touch? As he approached the neighborhood, however, he saw Spatter and Jinzi running toward him. That in itself was unusual; he’d trained them better than that. But he was so intent on his goal that he paid them no heed until Spatter tugged on his coat.

“Somethin’s up, Mister R,” Jinzi gasped. “We been lookin’ all over for ya.”

Renzik nearly thundered right past them but thought better of it. “Well?”

The kids exchanged glances. “Follow us.”

The urchins led him through a couple of alleys to an intersection, where they pointed out one of Mozzzy’s lower-level lookouts sitting down, back to a building, asleep on the job. Mozzzy would blow his top about this.

“He ain’t the only one,” Spatter whispered, and the little spies guided him to two more corners, where two more guards were passed out at their usual stations. Worse, they were now not far from the house where that Gnarflux couple lived.

Renzik’s bad mood now included a growing unease. When he examined the third guard, the dart in her neck told him that she’d been drugged. He pulled a second dart from the collar of her coat and sniffed it, pulling back a bit from the slightly sour tang. He recognized the nonlethal but potent herb they called purple lotus on the streets. Before he fully knew what he was doing, he started running toward the Gnarfluxes’

cottage.

The couple were just about done packing their rucksacks, taking only what they could carry with them, when the front door burst off its hinges. Renzik stepped into the house, and Seersa and Beezle froze in fear.

“Y’know, I may not like all the things I gotta do for a living . . . but I *really* don’t like bein’ made a fool of. If you’d just confessed,”—Renzik glowered at Beezle—“it woulda been quick and painless. As for you”—he pointed at Seersa—“you’ll answer to the boss now.”

Seersa backed away. “You don’t understand,” she said tightly. “We had to. They wouldn’t give us—”

“I don’t care,” Renzik said. “Everyone’s got a story, a reason. But you knew the rules, and you broke ’em anyway.”

Before he could say another word, Renzik heard a whizzing sound. As he dodged the round of poison darts, a human stepped into the room from the back of the house. He was tall and built pretty good, and he’d put himself between Renzik and his targets.

“I’ll take care of him,” the man told the couple. “Get to the escape tunnel. I’ve cleared out any likely interference. My people will meet you on the other side.”

Seersa disappeared into a side room for a moment, then emerged carrying another bundle. “Be careful, Shaw. He’s dangerous,” she warned, then followed her husband out the back of the house.

The taller man winced at the sound of his name; his cover had been blown.

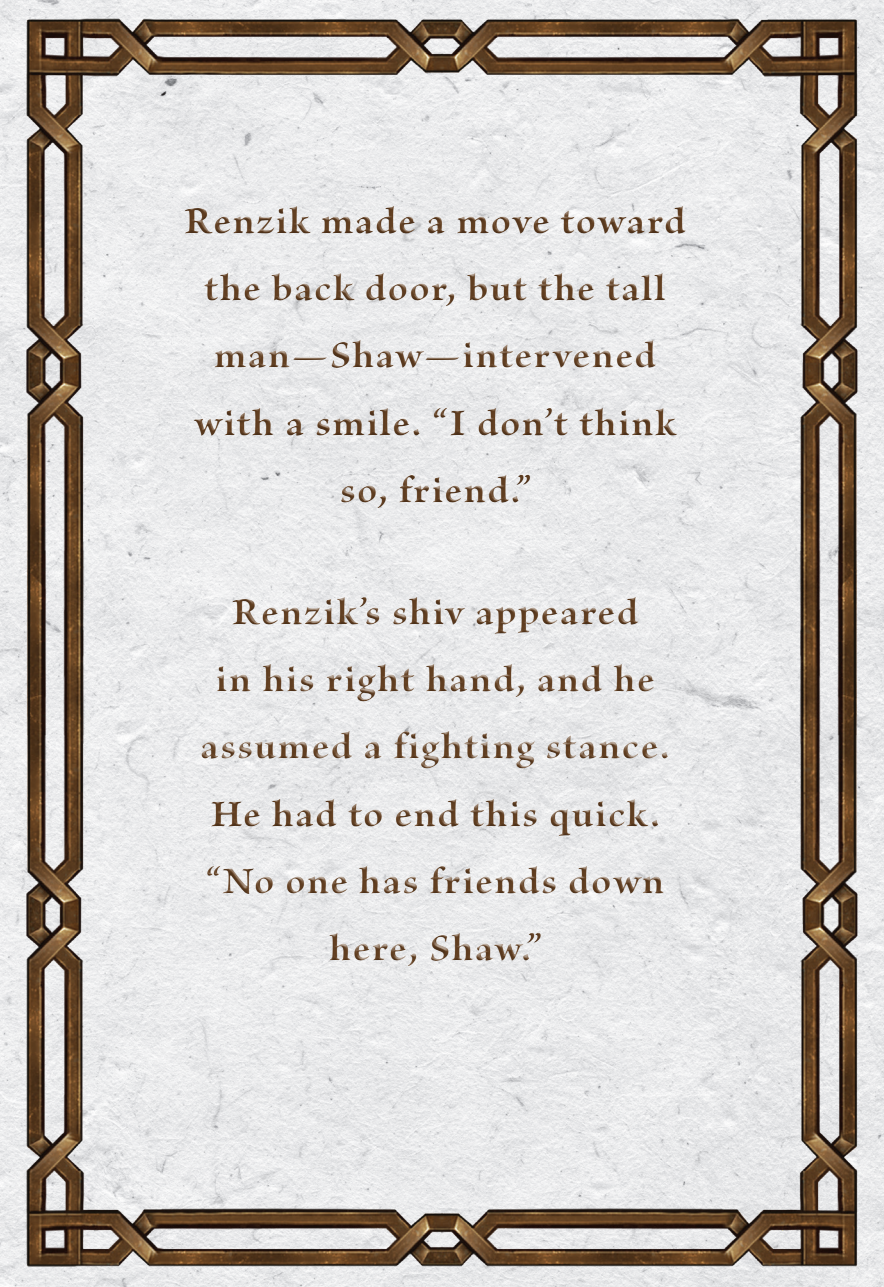
Renzik made a move toward the back door, but the tall man—Shaw—intervened with a smile. “I don’t think so, friend.”

Renzik’s shiv appeared in his right hand, and he assumed a fighting stance. He had to end this quick. “No one has friends down here, *Shaw*.”

“Well, the night is young.” Shaw’s grin annoyed Renzik, and he started forward, but Shaw suddenly had his own wicked-looking dagger in one hand . . . and a second in the other. Whoever this Shaw was, he was clearly no easy mark. The two fighters feinted and circled each other, seeking an opening, swiping and jabbing.

“You’re excellent with a blade,” Shaw said, stabbing in.

Renzik deflected Shaw’s dagger with his shiv. “Not so bad yourself,” he admitted



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as Shaw blocked his riposte and nearly sliced him open with the second dagger.

Renzik looked around and remembered the Gnarfluxes' fancy plate; there would be a wire loop on the other side to hang it on the wall. He backed up, holding Shaw at bay, and fitted the plate around his off hand, fashioning a makeshift buckler.

Shaw appraised him. "Clever. Resourceful. Raised on the street, I'm guessing. Grew up struggling for every morsel."

Renzik tried to tune him out.

"So how, if I may ask, can you stand by your trade prince, seeing the brutality, the violence, the oppression he inflicts on good people like these?"

"Vivi was right. No way you're a pirate," Renzik growled as he grabbed a chair and rushed at Shaw, who kicked out and splintered the chair, bringing Renzik up short. "Gotta be Alliance, bringing morals like that to a place like this."

"It shows," Shaw shot back. "Selfish trade princes siphoning profits, preventing their people from getting medicine? Keeping everyone dependent on *their* good will—which I hear is in short supply at best."

Renzik grimaced; the splinters stung, even if the words were nothing new. "Before the trade princes, it was every goblin for themselves, nobody was safe. Ever. At least now there's order." Renzik tossed the remainder of the chair at Shaw, who threw up a hand to block it, giving Renzik an opening. "Are they brutal? Sure. But there's two kinds of people in the Undermine: the smart and the stupid. And I know what happens to the stupid." He lunged at Shaw.

Shaw leapt onto a low table, which broke under his weight, and he stumbled back but regained his footing. "I suspect *you* are what happens to the stupid. Is this really all you want for yourself . . . for your family?"

Renzik laughed bitterly as he advanced. "I've got no family."

"You must care about someone down here," Shaw insisted as he swiped and twirled his blades, stymying Renzik's charge. "I noticed your little lookouts on my way in—all those children, relying on you for their next meal . . ."

Renzik thought about the street kids—what their futures looked like without him—then snarled; this guy was trying to get into his head. "Down here we live for ourselves, and I've seen it much worse."

“Yes, but you could *create* better. Like we have.”

Renzik scoffed. “Right. Getting back to that—what’s the Alliance doin’ here, spyin’ on us? Stealin’ from us? If you’re so high and mighty?”

Shaw shook his head. “Goblins . . . there is much to admire about your people. You’re creative. Inspired. You build brilliantly. And yet you seem satisfied to live in a system engineered to exploit you. Your boss sells bombs to line *his* pockets. He keeps your people down here, sick, poor, starving, doing *his* work. But those bombs also harm good people everywhere—including my people. I stole them to get them away from bad actors.”

Renzik stabbed forward, but Shaw dodged him. “The Alliance has committed its share of ugliness.”

“Absolutely,” Shaw admitted. “I’ve had a hand in some of it. The Alliance isn’t perfect, nothing is. But they do want peace. They are trying to be better.”

“By undercutting our system? And using those sick, starvin’ goblins to do your dirty work? You just like makin’ traitors.”

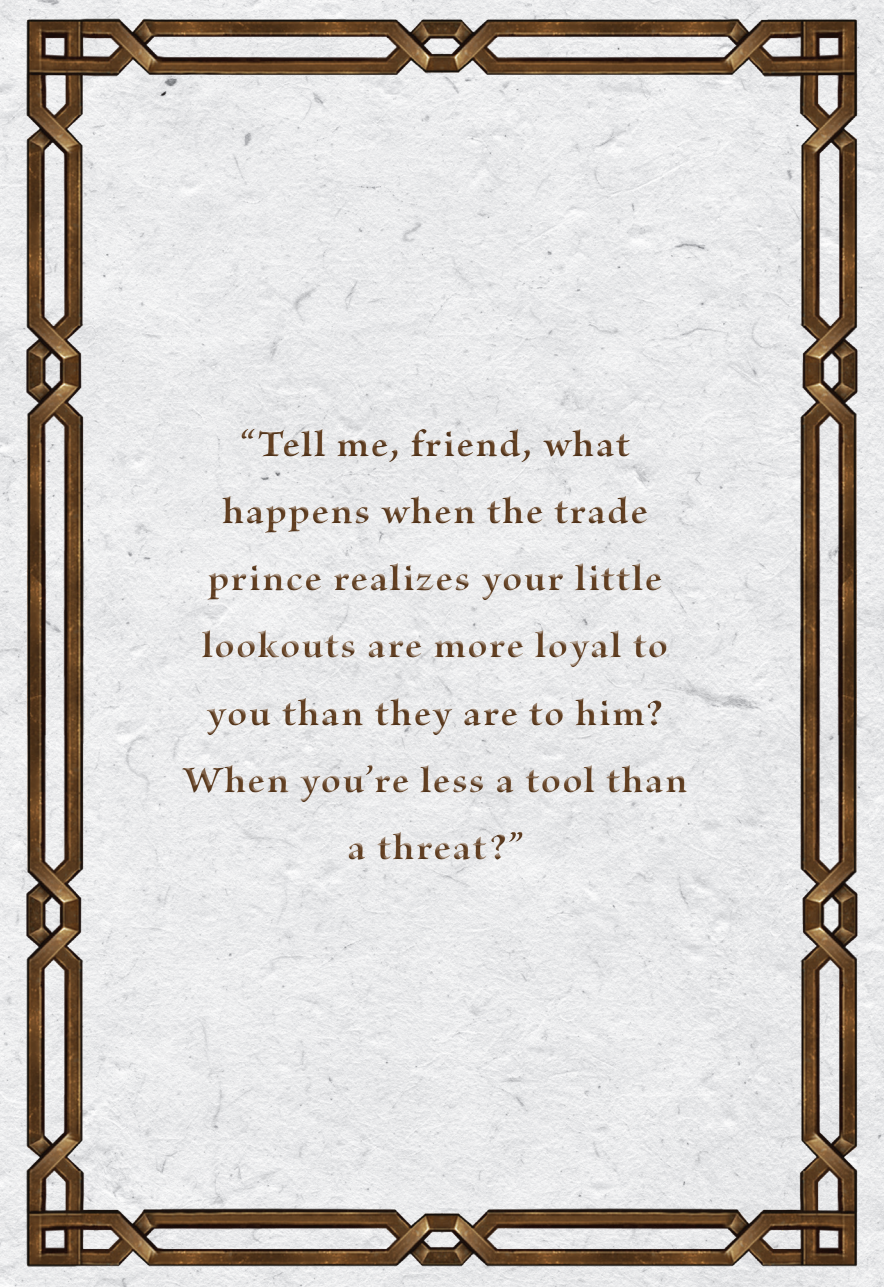
“Oh, come on,” Shaw countered as the two continued to dart and feint. “Traitors to what? A corrupt crime lord? The Gnarfluxes just wanted medicine, and maybe to do a little more than just exist.”

Renzik slashed at Shaw. “I survived well enough without bein’ a fink.”

“You’re so focused on going it alone, on your *strength*, how you *survived* this place,” Shaw snapped as he parried. “But you must understand that’s what Mozzzy wants—for you all to feel alone, on guard, keeping each other in line. You’re doing the hard work for him. Tell me, friend, what happens when the trade prince realizes your little lookouts are more loyal to *you* than they are to *him*? When you’re less a tool than a *threat*?”

Renzik sagged just for a moment under the weight of the thought—which gave Shaw his own opening. The spy flicked one of his daggers at Renzik, who barely deflected it with the broken plate; it stuck into the floor at his feet. Renzik grabbed it and launched himself at Shaw. The taller man would normally have had the advantage, but Renzik dove for the legs, slicing through Shaw’s pants; the larger man’s gasp of surprise and pain told him he’d scored a hit.

Rolling to his feet, ready to continue, Renzik prepared to attack, but Shaw began



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to stagger, gave him a strange smile.

“Well played, *friend*.” Without another word he collapsed, out cold.

Renzik was confused for a moment. He hadn’t scored anything like a fatal wound; heck, it wasn’t more than a deep scratch. Then he realized, ran a finger over the blade and sniffed it. It was coated with purple lotus. He’d gotten the tall human with his own strategy.

What gave Renzik pause was that he knew purple lotus was almost never fatal; it just put you to sleep. So even if Renzik’d lost—he realized as he trussed up Shaw securely—the tall one wasn’t looking to kill him or any of those lookouts. He examined the dagger, a very nice blade, and dropped it into his coat pocket. He had his prize for Mozzy, a far better outcome than he could possibly have imagined, but he felt a little twinge of . . . regret for what would almost certainly happen to the guy. Still, he was just doing his job.

Renzik dashed out the back of the house and looked around. To his surprise, Jinzi and Spatter were in the alley, a block apart.

He called to Jinzi, “You see where they went?”

She nodded. “This way.”

Renzik felt a glow of pride in the kids, tinged as it was with the weight of Shaw’s words. At least they’d all eat well tonight.



Seersa and Beezle made their way down the sewer tunnel toward the grate. They were tired, and Seersa stumbled under the load she was carrying.

“Let me,” Beezle said, taking it from her. “We’re almost free. Tomorrow at this time, we’ll be living another life.”

“Don’t bet on it,” came Renzik’s cold voice.

The couple stopped and turned to him, misery on their faces; they were *so close* to getting away.

Renzik was too angry—and frankly too tired—to care.

“You . . . you don’t have to do this,” Seersa pleaded.

“No, no. I do,” Renzik said flatly. “It’s you or me.” He raised Shaw’s dagger overhead and grabbed Beezle, who cringed, hunching over the bundle he was holding.

Just before he brought the weapon down, Renzik saw what Beezle was protecting: a little girl, maybe four years old, sick and sweating with fever.

“No!” she cried. “Don’t hurt Daddy!”

Renzik froze, and the world seemed to spin. Unthinking, he released Beezle and took a step back.

Seersa saw him falter. “We did what we had to, to save our little one,” she quavered. “What would you have done in our shoes? When Squeex got sick, there was no way we could pay for the medicine she needs. You’ve seen Specs Clinkstack’s office. Do you know what that’s *like*, to go to work there every day and be so powerless, so poor you can’t save your own kid?”

Renzik stared. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world,” he muttered, a thousand leagues away.

“But does it always have to be?” she asked tearfully, placing a hand on his arm.

Renzik stared down at her. This was where *his* life had started. And he’d become the monster that created him.

He sagged and swore . . . quite a lot.

Seersa and Beezle looked on, terrified as he punched the slimy wall of the tunnel. What would he do? Finally, Renzik stopped, breathing heavily, and glared at them.

“Go.”

They looked back, daring to hope.

Renzik squeezed his eyes shut, didn’t watch as the little family disappeared into the dark.



Shaw woke slowly, groggily. His ear itched. He tried to scratch it, only to realize he was bound hand and foot. He looked around; he was still in the Gnarlfluxes’ house. He rolled over with a groan—and stopped short. Sitting in the lone unbroken chair was Renzik, flipping the dagger he’d taken from Shaw, glaring at him.

“Well,” Shaw ventured, “I suppose the fact that I’m still alive is . . . hopeful?”

“We got us an optimist,” Renzik grunted. “Nah, Mozzy is gonna want to meet you.”

“Fair enough,” sighed Shaw. “What did you do to the family?”

Renzik paused. “They’re fine. I assume they’re with whoever you had waiting for ‘em.”

“Interesting,” Shaw mused. “That was a good deed you did.”

“Yeah, well, it won’t be good for *me* if the boss finds out,” Renzik muttered.

“Then why did you let them escape?”

Renzik stared at his captive for a moment, then shrugged. “Scars are a funny thing. They . . . hurt at first, especially the deep ones. But after a while, you lose all feeling there, they look less ugly. You stop thinkin’ about them as painful, see them as a point of pride. You talk about them with anyone who’ll ask, because they show that you’re strong for having survived something nasty.”

Renzik sighed deeply. “But that . . . doesn’t mean you wanted to get hurt in the first place. I’ve been survivin’ down here for a long time—like you said, a pretty miserable long time—and I do better than most, but that’s because I do my job better than most. You’re the first one who’s ever challenged that this is how things should be. That this is how things’ll *always* be.”

Shaw sat up slowly. “And . . . ?”

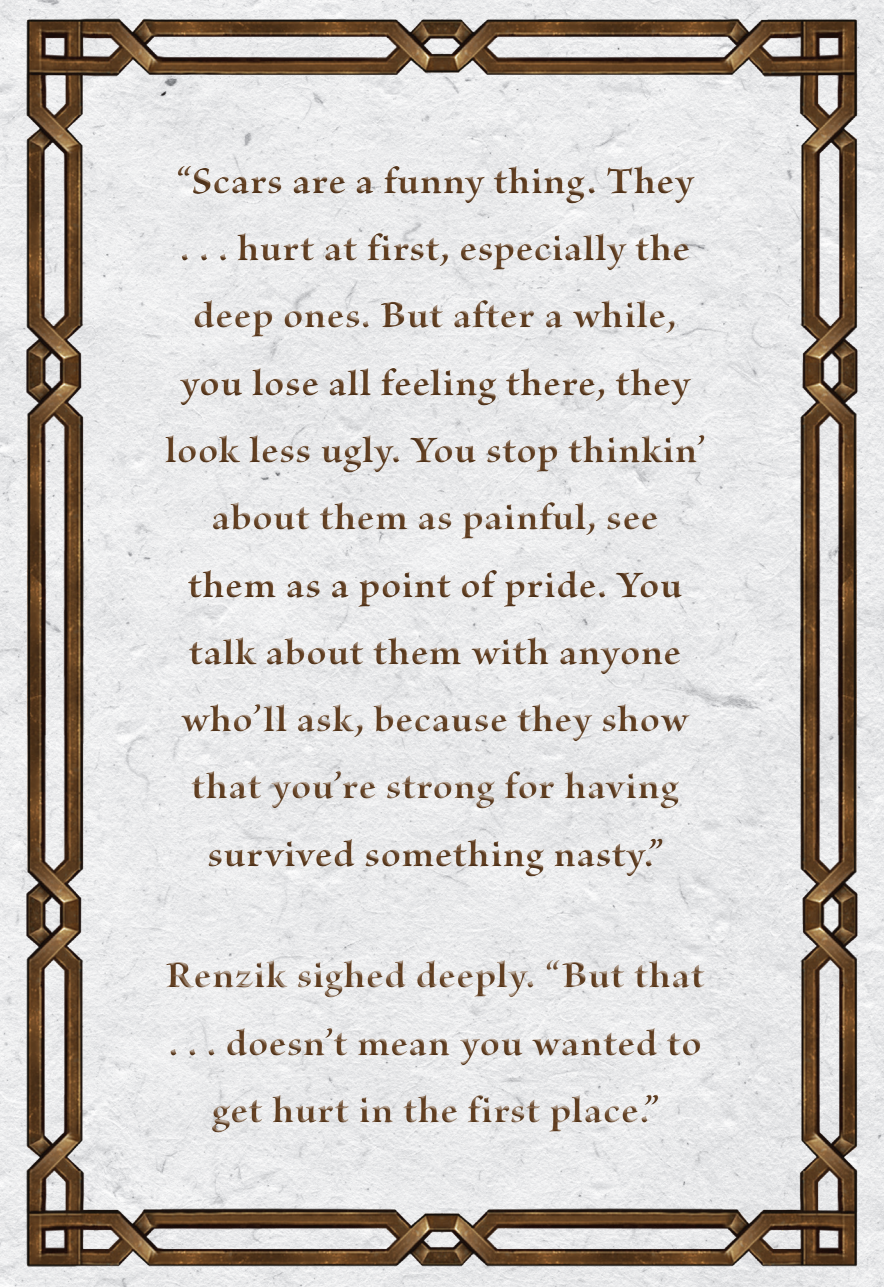
“I don’t really like to think about my life . . . but what you said kinda made me. I’ve only ever done anything to survive or to get ahead, only ever worked for more and more powerful criminals. I make a living breaking things—or worse. Most folks I deal with don’t have a pot to piss in. I never really considered that things could be different . . . better. That things could be *fair*.”

Shaw nodded. “I know, from experience . . . when something is all you’ve ever known, then you think that’s just the way it is. And you wonder how one person can ever hope to change it.”

“At least I’m respected here,” Renzik protested weakly.

“There is a difference, my friend,” Shaw offered, “between respect and fear.”

Renzik scowled at the bound man, held up the dagger, crossed to him . . . and cut the rope binding the spy. “Ain’t that the truth. You think there’s another way to go



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about”—he waved the blade around, indicating everything—“this?”

Shaw rubbed his wrists, then slowly rose to his feet. “Honestly, I don’t have many answers, and I can’t promise that I ever will. But I see something in you that gives me, well . . . hope.”

“You’re dumber than you look.”

Shaw shrugged. “Probably true.” He looked at his dagger. “I don’t suppose . . .”

Renzik snorted. “Nope. Souvenir.”

Shaw nodded. “What made you decide to release me?”

Renzik cocked his head. “Don’t look a gift kodo in the mouth, dummy. But while we’re asking, why would *you* risk everything to save some nobody goblins who already got you what you wanted?”

Shaw sighed. “Because they deserved it. Because I said I would. And if my word is worth nothing, then maybe . . . I’m worth even less. Light knows I can’t pretend I’m a good man . . . but I can serve a good cause.”

Renzik stared at him.

Shaw smiled wanly and started toward the rear entrance of the house, then paused. He tossed a coin onto the table.

Renzik picked it up. It bore a strange insignia.

“If you can find a way into Stormwind City, take this coin to the Master of Cheese,” Shaw told Renzik. “Maybe we can help you find what you’re looking for. Or at least something . . . more worthy.”

Renzik sheathed his new knife. “Just so you know. I don’t know that I can ever be a good guy—already done too many bad things—but maybe . . . maybe I can see being a bad guy in service of a good cause too.”

Shaw nodded his approval. “If I may abuse the cliché, we’re not so different, you and I.” He slipped into the night. Renzik sat there for a few long minutes before pocketing the coin.

The little house burned quickly enough. Renzik wanted to make sure it wouldn’t go out accidentally, then walked away. He hadn’t gone more than a couple of blocks when he realized that Jinzi was following him.

Renzik stopped and sighed. “Figured you’d have already found a place to sleep

for the night, Jinzi.”

She said nothing.

“So . . . what’s up?” he asked.

She side-eyed him suspiciously. “Who was that human? Was he the guy who tranqed Trade Prince Gloxscorn’s lookouts?”

Renzik’s eyes narrowed a little. “Don’t you worry about that. And don’t you talk about that neither.”

He reached into a pocket and handed her several more coins.

She counted them in a split second and jutted her jaw at him defiantly. “It’s gonna take a *whole* lot more than that to buy me off.”

He cocked his head. “You want more money?”

She shook her head. “I want a promotion.”

Renzik grinned. “Let’s talk. I’ll buy dinner.”



“So?” Mozzy demanded from Renzik the next day.

“I found the culprits, Trade Prince Gloxscorn. Young couple short on cash. A driver and one of Specs’s secretaries.”

“Specs! You think he was involved?”

Renzik considered. He certainly didn’t like the old jerk, but it wasn’t worth the trouble. “No, sir.”

“I assume you took care of them?” Mozzy said. “I need to send a message to anyone who might get ideas about crossing me.”

“Let me put it this way,” Renzik assured him. “They ain’t never gonna make trouble for you again.”

Mozzy smiled and nodded. “Knew I could count on you. Now, get back out there and crack some heads.”

Leaving Mozzy’s HQ and stepping into the streets, Renzik pulled his coat a little tighter against the dank and reflected on the events of the last week. Maybe it had been stupid to lie to Mozzy—so if he was smart, he’d have to figure out how to evade the

trade prince's inevitable fury. He still felt the weight of the spy's coin in his pocket.
Perhaps there were warmer days ahead.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Robinson is a prolific animation writer and creator who has worked for companies like Marvel, WB, Hasbro, Cartoon Network, Sony, and others on IP like Transformers, Spider-Man, Avengers, Young Justice, G.I. Joe, and more. Since joining Blizzard Entertainment in 2014, he has written animated shorts, songs, world-building lore, comics, and short stories for all their games, and is eager to bring Blizzard's fans more.