



# CONUNDRUM

**JEFF CROOK**





## **INTRODUCTION**

Although the events described in this report are true, the dialogue has been slowed to protect the sanity of the reader.

—The Literary Treasures and  
Racial Heritage Guild of Mount Nevermind



## CHAPTER 1

As they strolled along the strand, the gnome in the red jumpsuit with gold braids on the sleeves led the way with a purposeful (if short-legged) stride. The other two—a shorter gnome similarly dressed, and a green-vested kender—followed behind, delighting each other by singing the opposing parts in the accidental decapitation scene of the gnomish opera *In the Hall of the Mountain Dwarf*, otherwise known as *The Nibelugnut*. The shorter gnome roared the role of Turpidus, the dwarf toolmaker, while the kender's shrill (though not unlovely) tones told of the dismay of the lovely and hapless Jadander as the vegetable polisher escapes her control and careens through the marketplace of Thorbardin.

"Thy hand, Jadander?" Turpidus laments as his bearded head wags free of his neck. "Oh! Lay me in the earth."

The shorter gnome was dressed like his fellow—a tight red jumpsuit of close-knit material, with gold braids circling the cuffs, and the Tarbrush-and-Bilgepump symbol of the Maritime Sciences Guild sewn over his left breast pocket. He differed from the taller gnome only in his height, the

amount of white hair on his rather bulbous head, and the variety of things protruding from the dozen or so pockets covering every available inch of free space on his jumpsuit. Where his companion's pockets were nearly empty, except for a small, clever whistle neatly outlined on his right buttocks as he walked, the shorter gnome's pockets were bulging with scrolls, papers, parchments, quills, pens, compasses, as well as what appeared to be an astrolabe.

The kender wore a pair of faded yellow leggings tucked into his boots and a furry green vest, which he asserted was made from the hide of a behemoth. As he strode bouncingly along, his kender throat warbling with Jadander's lamentations, he absentmindedly spun the inevitable weapon of the kender race—a hoopak staff. Its copper-shod tip glinted circles in the light of the westerling sun, now beginning its descent toward the ocean.

Ahead rose the dry, rocky hills of northern Sancrist Isle, and beyond the hills, a single mountain: Mount Nevermind, home of the gnomes of western Krynn.

Their path along the beach did not lead toward the mountain. It led instead toward a pile of black boulders that split the beach like a wall, from the hills down into the surf, and around which the turbid ocean crashed and foamed. Tiny red crabs danced along the flat wet edges of the surf, back and forth, back and forth, waving their big pinchers over their backs.

Jadander's solo having come to an end, the kender immediately launched into a frighteningly realistic imitation of a gnomish bladder horn playing the old sailor's ditty "Merry It Is," but only a few ear-shattering notes into his tune, his voice trailed off into a sigh of wonder. His companions stopped, and the shorter gnome pointed toward the distant rocks.

From beyond the black, seaweed-draped boulders shot a small dark object, roughly spherical and trailing a beard

## JEFF CROOK

of fire. They heard a faint roar, like a great army cheering its champion as he rides out to deliver a challenge. The object scribed a perfect parabola out over the surging waves and fell with a thunderous splash a quarter mile out to sea. A little puff of steam marked the place where it fell. The cheering passed into groans of disappointment, which eventually tapered off into the percussion noises of hammers and the sighing of saws.

"There they are," the shorter gnome stated, lowering his hand. The three started forward again, but without musical accompaniment.

They continued along the beach, the taller gnome in the lead, his compatriot immediately behind him, the green-vested kender bringing up a meandering rear guard. The kender strayed this way and that to inspect an unusually shaped bit of driftwood, chase a red crab, or pick up a seashell and drop it into one of his bulging pouches.

"Is there any buried treasure along this beach?" he asked as they neared the boulders amid the continuing sounds of construction.

"No," the lead gnome answered.

"How do you know? Have you searched? There might have been pirates once. . . ."

"There are no pirates in these waters," the taller gnome answered without turning. His thin white hair stirred restlessly in the wind as he walked.

"Smugglers, then," the kender pressed, "or shipwrecks."

"Actually, we don't allow shipwrecks along this shore any longer," the shorter gnome explained. "We've sunk a variety of safety precautions into the seabed offshore, which should prevent any future disasters."

The hammering and sawing stopped, and with a much louder cheer, another dark flaming object climbed heavenward beyond the boulders. This one was bigger, and

scribed a higher, grander curve against the sky before it, too, crashed into the sea a quarter mile out. The cheers tapered off into groans. Soon came more hammering and sawing.

Where the enormous black boulders marched down into the surf, the beach narrowed to less than fifty paces from the stony feet of the hills to the water at low tide. The sand here was smooth, flat, wet from the receding tide and the constant spray from the boulders, and made for easy walking. The sounds of hammering and sawing echoed noisily from the cliffs beyond the black rocks.

Suddenly, two black-armored warriors appeared from between a pair of boulders. By the skull designs on their armor and on the horses' tack and barding, they appeared to be Knights of Neraka. Formerly known as Knights of Takhisis, they were the evil counterparts to the noble and goodly Knights of Solamnia. They spurred their horses directly at the three companions, their faces twisted into hideous grins. The two gnomes quickly scuttled crabwise out of the way, dragging the reluctant kender with them, while the horses thundered past, flinging gouts of wet sand from their hooves, and galloped off into the distance, vanishing around a bend in the coastline.

The kender lay on the wet sand staring after the Knights before finally rising and brushing off his elbows. "You'd think they were trying to trample us on purpose," he said. He settled his pouches about his waist and picked up his hoopak from where it had been smashed into the sand by a heavy, iron-shod hoof.

"They mostly don't even notice we are here," the shorter gnome said. "Mostly."

"Except when they want something from us," the other added grimly as they continued on their way.

Upon closer inspection, it became apparent that the black boulders, which had appeared from a distance to be

## JEFF CROOK

almost touching, were in fact widely separated, with numerous small tidal pools lying between them. The hoof-prints of the Knights' horses were plainly visible in the sand, as were the thousands of faint, spindly prints of the hundreds of birds—mostly plovers, spoonbills and waders—now working the pools.

But what most interested the three, drawing gasps of delight from the kender and nods of approval from the gnomes, was the scene spreading beyond the boulders. The hills drew back from the beach and climbed ever higher. This left a wide, sandy bay, like a great amphitheater, walled on the northern side by tall cliffs that were home to many thousands of gulls. Hundreds of gnomes could be seen scurrying all over this beach and the surrounding hill-sides, some dragging freshly cut trees down from the hills, others hauling barrels from a ship beached in the surf, still others busily quarrying huge stones from the nearby sea-washed cliff. More labored to haul the quarried stones on giant rafts through the breakers, while yet more were involved in constructing the wildest collection of catapults and ballista ever before assembled in one place. Each catapult was bigger than the last, with the one currently under construction the biggest of them all. Beside this colossal catapult lay a stone nearly as big as a house.

Nearer to the observers of this circus-like scene stood a party-colored canopy, its ropes staked out in the sand near the water's edge. Beneath it, a gathering of Knights of Neraka, their squires and horses, keenly observed the gnomes' activities. It appeared to be the scene of a siege, yet there was nothing to besiege. No castle crouched on yonder beetling cliffs. While they watched, a catapult loosed a flaming stone out to sea. Hundreds of gnomes stopped their work to stand and cheer, only to groan with disappointment when the stone struck the sea in a mighty splash a good half-mile from shore. Only the Knights

seemed pleased with this result, for there was a general round of nodding, backslapping, laughing and pointing at the spot where the stone sank. The gnomes returned to their business. Hammers rapped and saws snored, ropes creaked and chisels rang against stone.

"It looks like things are going well," the taller gnome observed as he looked over the chaotic scene.

"Indeed," his shorter companion concurred. "I suspect the professor has nearly completed his studies."

"What're they doing?" the kender asked. "Testing new weapons?"

"Don't be ridiculous. The professor is studying the buoyancy of very large hot stones," the taller gnome answered as he strode off in the direction of the Knights' tent.



"Good evening," the tall gnome said to the Knight who stopped them outside the tent when it became apparent that they intended to enter. "We are here to see Sir Wolhelm."

The Knight eyed the kender dubiously and maintained his position in front of the gnome, his mailed hand resting firmly on the sword at his hip.

"I am Commodore Brigg, of the Maritime Sciences Guild," the tall gnome said. "My compatriot here is Navigator Snork, also of the Maritime Sciences Guild."

The shorter gnome bowed, taking care to clap a hand over those pockets most likely to spill their contents. The kender stepped forward and extended his small sun-browned hand in greeting.

"This is Razmous Pinchpocket, cartographer and chief acquisitions officer for the maiden voyage of the MNS *Indestructible*," the commodore said. The Knight glared at



## JEFF CROOK

the kender's hand as if it were a snake, his fingers twitching round the hilt of his sword.

"How do you do?" Razmous asked, edging closer to the Knight and eyeing the large leather pouch at his belt.

The Knight took a cautious step back in the sand and gripped his sword more tightly. "What do you want here?" he demanded. "Go on. Be on your way before I have you arrested . . . and searched!" This last comment was directed at the kender, whose innocent smile collapsed into an injured pout.

"We have been summoned here, Sir Knight!" Commodore Brigg snapped as he stepped closer, forcing the Knight to take another retreating step.

"Sure. Right." The Knight chuckled, half-drawing his sword.

"Sir Morsed, who is that?" a booming, basso voice called from the group of black-armored figures beneath the canopy.

"Some gnome," the Knight answered over his shoulder. "Claims to be a Commodore Brigg."

"Show him in, please."

A smug smile spread across the commodore's face, parting his white beard like a knife-stroke.

"He's got a kender, sir," the Knight warned, still not sheathing his weapon.

There was no immediate response, rather some muttering and restless shifting among the tent's occupants. Finally, the baritone voice said, "Very well. Show them in." At the same time, most of the Knights and squires departed the tent, many leading their steeds as well, as if they feared the kender might find some way to pocket a warhorse.

This left just a few Knights remaining, their horses forming a restless wall between the open back of the tent and the sea. The largest and most important-looking of the Knights sat on a campstool behind a low table, on top of

which was spread a profusion of papers and scrolls, enough to cause even the mildest kender heart to flutter with greedy longings. The Knight absently stroked his thick black beard as he pored over some calculation and made notations into a dog-eared book resting on his lap. Beside him stood a studious young Knight, dressed in long gray robes and holding a tablet to his chest. A few others lounged about the tent, warily eyeing the approaching kender but continuing their conversations, which seemed mostly concerned with weight ratios, torsion strength, terminal velocities, and conic sections of a plane.

The area beneath the tent was strewn with straw and smelled strongly of horses, oiled leather, and stale sweat. By the crumpled blankets lying in the corners it appeared the Knights had been here many days. Large canvas rolls, secured with straps to the underside of the canopy's eaves, probably served as walls that could be let down at night to keep out the wind and elements.

"This is half command post, half bedroom, and half barn," Navigator Snork muttered distastefully as they entered.

"Be quiet," the commodore whispered. They stopped before Sir Wolhelm, and Commodore Brigg bowed low, sweeping the floor at his feet with one hand.

"Sir Wolhelm, my companions and—"

The Knight silenced him with an impatient wave, then continued scribbling in his book. the commodore's lips set into a hard frown, but he said nothing. Navigator Snork sucked his teeth and listened to his belly growl; it was well past lunchtime. After scanning the contents of the tabletop and finding nothing but schematics, Razmous's periwinkle eyes wandered around the interior of the tent, a bored expression settling into the delicate lines and wrinkles of his face. He absently chewed the brown tip of his topknot and fiddled with the things in his pouches. His gaze finally

## JEFF CROOK

came to rest on one of the horses. The great black beast stamped and snorted nervously, its one visible red-rimmed eye glaring at the kender in alarm.

Without warning, a third gnome scurried into the tent, crossed to the table, and irritably shoved its contents onto the floor. From under his arm, he drew a soggy ream of drawings and schematics and flopped them onto the cleared space. Like Commodore Brigg and Navigator Snork, this gnome was short. He could have passed without ducking beneath the belly of any one of the Knights' warhorses, and he had a large, bulbous brown head scantily covered by a few thin wisps of downy white hair. From his jaws sprouted a thick tangle of curly white beard. What distinguished him most was his mode of dress. He wore a tan coverall buttoned up the back like a child's pajamas, which was dark with seawater all the way up to his armpits. Over the right breast pocket was sewn the rock-and-pick symbol of the Geological Sciences Guild, but the blue background of the patch indicated that he was a marine geology specialist—a rare specialization for a mountain-dwelling race. Behind one large, sunburned ear protruded a pencil, another peeked from the curls of his beard, and a third was clamped firmly between his strong white teeth, giving him something of a snarling appearance. He looked round the table for a moment, then turned to the kender and held out one stubby-fingered hand, palm upward.

"You haven't got a pencil, have you?" he asked.

"I don't know," Razmous answered with delight. "Let me see!" He flopped to the ground and upended his pouches.

Sir Wolhelm rose in alarm. "See here now, Professor—" he began.

Commodore Brigg perked up. "Professor? Professor Hap-Troggensbottle?"

"At your service, sir!" the newcomer declared without hesitation, bowing low.

The commodore grabbed his hand and shook it heartily. They embraced, slapping each other on the back like two people trying to put out a fire.

"See here . . ." the Knight leader said.

"Commodore Brigg of the MNS *Indestructible*," the commodore said as they parted. "Navigator Snork, and Chief Acquisitions Officer Razmous Pinchpocket."

"How do you do?" the kender said from where he had chased something under the table. The Knights leaped back, clutching at their money pouches.

Snork bowed, then tugged his beard in respect. The professor made a rude noise with his lips. Snork bowed again, blushing with pride.

The professor turned back to Commodore Brigg. "The *Indestructible*, eh? Isn't that a . . ."

"A Class C Submersible Deepswimmer, yes," the commodore answered for him.

"Ah, so that is why you are here."

"We would like to invite you—" Commodore Brigg began.

Sir Wolhelm cut him off angrily. "I am in charge here! There will be no inviting without my say so."

"Yes, of course," the commodore bowed. Professor Hap-Troggensbottle nodded his reluctant assent.

The leader of the Knights resumed his seat behind the table, settling himself onto the tiny stool with as much dignity as he could muster, and glared around the tent. "Now," he said, his black beard bristling, "Professor Hap-Troggensbottle, you are hereby *ordered* by the Knights of Neraka, the rightful rulers-regent of Mount Nevermind for His Inestimable Majesty Pyrothraxus the dragon, to undertake the voyage of the MNS *Indestructible*, representing the interests of the Knighthood and of Mount Nevermind in

## JEFF CROOK

all matters of a geologic question.”

Out on the beach, another of the catapults fired its load out to sea, forcing a pause. Commodore Brigg took this opportunity to resume the conversation.

“We know of your life quest to discover why small rocks, and even big rocks, sink, while really big rocks like islands and continents float. We intend to subnavigate the continent of Ansalon,” said Commodore Brigg, “to complete the great voyage begun by the MNS *Polywog*, which nearly ended in disaster, some twenty-five years ago.”

“It is *ordered*, by the Knights of Neraka,” Sir Wolhelm continued with a warning glance at the commodore, “that the legendary Sub-Ansalonian Passage between Mount Nevermind in the west and Winston’s Tower in the east be located and—”

“The first attempt nearly ended in disaster,” Navigator Snork chimed in. “The MNS *Polywog* actually succeeded in completing the west-to-east leg of the journey. Fortunately, on the return leg, the ship was lost, and the crew has not been seen since. So this still leaves the east-to-west leg of the journey to complete the life quest. Chief Acquisitions Officer Razmous”—a slight bow from same—“is vital to the success of this mission, as he claims to be in possession of a copy of the map left at Winston’s Tower before the *Polywog* began its return voyage.”

“Yes, I have it here somewhere,” the kender declared from under the table.

“The kender has the long-lost map?” Sir Wolhelm exclaimed, forgetting that he had been interrupted again. He glared under the table, but the kender had vanished.

“Yes, of course. And he is a most qualified cartographer,” Commodore Brigg asserted.

“The gods help you,” the young Knight in the gray robes sighed.

With a puzzled look at this remark, Commodore Brigg

continued, "We intend to sail round the northern shore of Ansalon until we reach the Blood Sea of Istar. We'll stop off in Flotsam to replenish our supplies—"

"I have additions to those orders," Sir Wolhelm inserted hastily, while still searching beneath the table for the kender. The young Gray Robe read from his tablet. "When you reach the city of Flotsam, you are ordered take on board the Thorn Knight, Sir Tanar Lobcrow, and extend him every courtesy."

The gnomes exchanged puzzled looks.

"Whatever for?" the commodore exclaimed. "I have no need of a sorcerer. My crew list is already completed."

"You are so *ordered*, Brigg," Sir Wolhelm said. "If you want the Knights of Neraka to finance this excursion of yours, as agreed, you must abide by our terms. We want one of our own on this voyage, but we'll not needlessly risk the life of even one Knight until you have proved you can sail your ship from here to Flotsam."

"I assure you, Sir Wolhelm, the MNS *Indestructible* will reach Flotsam," the commodore responded in insulted tones. "However, my ship is not built to accommodate individuals of your . . . your . . ." he paused, waving his hand vaguely toward the Knight Commander.

"Stature," Snork whispered.

"Stature!" Commodore Brigg snapped. "Yes, that's it. This is a gnome-built ship built for gnomes, and, well, the occasional kender. Your Knight will be most uncomfortable, rest assured. One might even say cramped. We've agreed to turn over all logs, maps, records and so forth, upon our successful return. That should be sufficient. I should think that would satisfy your . . . how shall we say? . . . curiosity about our venture."

The Knight's face darkened, and the muscles along his jaw began to quiver. "There is no point in arguing. You have been ordered to take Sir Tanar aboard at Flotsam, and

## JEFF CROOK

that is what you shall do. Sir Tanar will see that you do not accidentally get lost along the way and, for example, fall into the hands of any Knights of Solamnna.”

“Very well,” the commodore sighed. Obviously flustered, he turned back to the professor. “As I was saying, we will put into port at Flotsam. From there, we sail to the center of the Blood Sea, dive to the bottom, and enter the chasm that once led to the Abyss. In the wall of this deep crevasse is an opening, a cave, from which the *Polywog* emerged all those years ago at the end of their legendary west-to-east journey. We should emerge in the New Sea somewhere near the Isle of Schallsea.”

“Sounds impossible,” the professor said while gnawing thoughtfully on the pencil in his mouth.

“Perhaps—but let me remind you that no one is going anywhere until these ordinance experiments are completed,” Sir Wolhelm said.

The professor’s eyes narrowed beneath his shaggy white brows. “These may be ordinance experiments to you Knights, but they are scientific experiments to me,” he snarled. “Need I remind you that my life quest is to unravel the mystery of buoyant stone? And these experiments, I tell you, are a complete failure!” He stabbed his pencil into the ream of wet schematics he had thrown onto the table upon first entering the tent. Then he drew the pencil from his beard, hurled it to the ground and stomped on it vehemently.

“Every time we come up with a useful, time-saving device you military types twist our machines to your own evil uses!” he shouted while stomping around the tent. “Take the gnomeflinger, for instance, designed to transport gnomes to the various levels within the central shaft of Mount Nevermind. You use it to hurl rocks to batter down the walls of your enemies. Or the cheese-holer, an ingenious device designed to put the holes in cheese, yet you

make it an instrument of torture! Science has ever been the pawn of the military!”

Sir Wolhelm rose, his face scarlet with rage, but fortunately whatever he was about to say was interrupted by the young Thorn Knight. “Come now, Professor. They haven’t been a complete waste of time. And there is still the last and greatest of your experiments—Big Bertrem.” He pointed out over the sands toward the catapult of truly monstrous proportions, requiring the pulley systems of three normal catapults just to draw, and a crew of well over two hundred gnomes. The stone currently being loaded onto it was easily large enough to knock a dragon out of the sky.

“Well, hmm, true, I would like to see Big Bertrem fired, just once,” the professor said dreamily, his pique momentarily forgotten. He reached twitchingly for the pencil behind his ear, then spun back to the table and began scribbling calculations of the tangents of imaginary circles.

The Knights nodded and smiled to one another over the gnomes’ heads.



By the time the sun had dropped an hour closer to the horizon, the gargantuan ballista was ready. From their vantage point in the tent, Commodore Brigg and Navigator Snork could see the professor scurrying about in its shadow, shouting last-minute orders. Someone lit the stone with a torch, setting fire to the tar covering every inch of its surface. As the flames blazed up, gnomes scattered in all directions, leaving the professor alone by the catapult’s release. In the light of the westering sun, they saw an axe rise up, then flash down. A report like the cracking of a whip echoed against the cliffs. There followed a tremendous bone-shaking thud, and a wave of sand spread like ripples in a pond away from Big Bertrem. The throwing



## JEFF CROOK

arm rose slowly, bending under the weight of the massive flaming stone, but then counterweights swung into place, and a gout of steam escaped from what appeared to be a smokestack. Two giant flywheels, attached to the fulcrum post, began to whirl faster and faster. The throwing arm of the catapult hesitated for a moment, like a diver taking a deep breath before leaping, and then the entire contraption flipped over backwards, pivoting around a point in space centered on the house-sized stone. The spinning fly wheels dug in, throwing up a huge fountain of sand that instantly buried three dozen members of the Mishaps Guild who were rushing in to record and measure the event as it was happening. Meanwhile, the flywheels found purchase in the sand and the thing began to move. Its steam whistle screaming, the monstrous catapult tore across the beach and up into the hills beyond, where it sailed over the crest of a ridge and disappeared in a cloud of dust, rocks, and uprooted trees.

Within moments, Professor Hap-Troggsbottle appeared from the wreckage down the beach, a bit battered but alive. His eyes beamed with delight. He approached the tent, slapping sand and dust from his beard and eyebrows. A pencil, snapped cleanly in two, dangled behind his ear.

"I'm tempted to think you did that on purpose," Sir Wolhelm accused as he emerged from the tent.

"I assure you, I could not produce that result again unless I tried," the professor answered as he approached Commodore Brigg. "Now, what is the status of your ship? Are we prepared to disembark?"

"Yes," the commodore harrumphed, "except we are still looking for the security officer. We were hoping to get a Knight—a real Knight and not some blasted sorcerer. The name we have is Sir Grumdish. Do you know him?"

"Grumdish?" Sir Wolhelm snorted as he approached. "Never heard of him."

## CONUNDRUM

His aide-de-camp, the young Thorn Knight, leaned over and whispered something into his commander's ear. Sir Wolhelm's eyes narrowed. "Him!"

He turned to Commodore Brigg, smiling wolfishly. "Yes, of course. Take him with you. By all means. Sir Jarnett will show you to him. He isn't far." He strode away, calling for the squires to saddle Sir Jarnett's horse.

Within moments, a seemingly reluctant Sir Jarnett was mounted and leading the three gnomes and their kender companion up into the hills, taking a path not far from the one trailblazed moments before by Big Bertrem. When they had gone, a squire approached and reported that Sir Wolhelm's warhorse was missing. The Knight eyed the hills suspiciously, considering whether to send a patrol to arrest the kender, but then he shook his head in disbelief, silently reprimanding himself. "Not even a kender," he muttered.