

Mary was in the kitchen when they came.

Up until that point it had been an ordinary evening. The air in the house had the quality of cool outside air that had been bullied into a comfortable level of warmth by the furnace. The kids were in the living room watching some dubbed foreign cartoon. Mary's husband, Rick, was working late for the third time that week. Though Mary had gone the proverbial route from rags to riches when she married Rick, she often wondered if the money was worth the long hours she spent without him. The poverty of her youth had one glaring advantage over her current situation: tiny apartments and houses had an intimacy larger homes lacked. When the children were at school and her husband at work, Mary found the many spacious rooms of her upscale house to be nothing more than so much emptiness.

The wind howled outside the windows as Mary slipped into the kitchen for a glass of wine. She tried to avoid drinking in front of the kids, but occasionally boredom overcame her sense of discretion. Dinner would be out of the oven soon, which meant another meal without Rick, another evening of washing dishes, another night of reading and waiting.

A sudden pounding at the front door startled Mary. She glanced out the nearest window into the dark night. Who could it be at this hour?

The knock came again before Mary had even made her way out of the kitchen into the hallway. Whomever it was, they were beating on the door like they meant to kick it down. Mary was going to give them a piece of her mind.

The air of the front entryway resonated with a third series of knocks just as Mary was leaving the front hall. "All right, enough!" she called. "I'm coming."

The edge of a massive ax blade chopped through the heavy wood of the front door between the knob and the frame, then vanished in a blink, leaving a clean slit in the door. Another impact on the door flung it open so hard that it embedded in the opposite wall.

Mary was already running. As she fled back down the hall she heard footsteps following her, impossibly heavy footsteps that made the house tremble. Almost before she knew it she was back in the kitchen, plucking the phone from its cradle and dialing 119.

"119, what is your emergency?" the operator droned in a trained monotone.

"Help! There's a man breaking into my house!" Mary screamed.

"Where are you, ma'am?"

"This is 2319 Tiger Tail Lane, there's a man here with an ax--"

"Mom, what's going on?" Claire's frightened voice called from the living room. The plodding footsteps were just outside the kitchen in the hall now.

"Run, kids!" Mary screamed, not realizing she was still holding the receiver. "Out the back--"

Movement flared in the corner of her eye. Her instinctive flinch was barely enough to save her life as the ax's head missed her by a hair's breadth and dug into the kitchen wall.

Instinct took over and Mary fled to the far kitchen door, the one that led into the living room.

Claire was on her feet in front of the couch, looking terrified; Timmy was curled up on the couch itself, bawling.

"What's happening?" Claire whimpered. Mary could hear the awful drumbeat footsteps behind her as she scooped her children into her arms and sprinted for the back of the room, toward the glass doors leading into the patio. If they could make it outside and around the house into the garage...

She paused long enough to flip open the lock and haul the door open before fleeing into the night. The drumming footsteps stayed close behind as Mary ran blindly across the patio and around the west side of the house, becoming dull thuds on the sandy ground.

Claire was crying and Timmy now shrieking hysterically as Mary neared the southwestern corner of the house. Her mind never tried to touch upon the what or the why of the situation: in her panic, her only thoughts were of how to escape. A shoe came free as she rounded the corner. Mary didn't even notice it. The whole of her being was dedicated to reaching the garage as the far end of the south side. One of the two doors was open again. For the first time Mary was actually happy that Rick usually forgot to close the garage.

Dashing inside, Mary practically tossed her children in the back and dropped into the front seat.

“Hold on!” she cried.

Then she realized she had forgotten her keys. Fleeing from the house determined to escape, the plain logic that she would need her keys when she reached her car had never occurred to her. Now she wasn't even sure where they were. Upstairs on the nightstand? Hanging on the hooks in the kitchen?

As Mary's mind seized on the dilemma a pall of orange light fell over the garage. Even the horror and strangeness of the previous moments could not prepare Mary for what she saw as her eyes crept to the rearview mirror.

There was a man standing in the driveway just outside the garage, and he was on fire. A huge corona of flames surrounded him as he stood, undistracted, watching the family. His features were obscured by the light and shadows of the blaze. Only his silhouette, massive and eerily still, could be seen. Moot though it was, Mary had no doubt what the point of his being there was: to prevent her from taking the car.

“Back in the house,” she said quietly.

Claire, who had been dutifully trying to affix Tim's seatbelt, looked at her mother. “But, mom...”

“Now!” Mary shrieked. She threw her door open and pulled herself out of the car. The moment she did, the burning man began to move toward her. It was the same bass-drum thumping as before, making the concrete slabs of the driveway and garage floor shudder with each step.

“Hurry!” cried Mary. The kids practically spilled out of the back seat, Claire hauling the still-wailing Timmy by the hand. Mary gathered them up again and ran to the inside door. As she threw it open and re-entered the house the blazing man passed the trunk of the car; the paint blistered and ran as flames licked at it.

Mary's panic became sheer terror. The open house, so brightly lit and clean, seemed alien now. No ordinary home inhabited by rational people could play host to what was happening. Mary's eyes darted about as she fled through the ground floor, looking for the man with the ax--or was he the burning man now?

She ran to the kitchen door and looked at the hooks: no keys. They must be upstairs in the bedroom. The only way to reach them was back down the hallway, toward the stairs, the direction the man was coming from. She could hear those damned footsteps approaching, accompanied by the hiss and crackle of the flames he was spreading with every step, coming to kill her as her house burned.

Then another sound reached her through the open front door: the screech of breaking tires.

Mary turned and ran blindly for the front door. The entryway was clear: she made it to the threshold and screamed, “Rick!”

It wasn't Rick.

Idling in the street in front of the house was the most bizarre vehicle Mary had ever seen, some conglomeration of a van and...a tank. In any other scenario it might have been a cause for some mix of curiosity and fear, but with Mary's sanity threatening to unravel from terror it was only one more strange sight. Still, she was on the verge of running into the street, blindly fleeing the unfathomable events behind her, when Claire screamed.

Instinctively Mary flinched, undoubtedly the only thing that saved her life. Something hit her in the back on the right side. She didn't feel pain, exactly, only the force of the impact and a strange sensation of a foreign object within her body. Timmy and Claire were both screaming now, but the sound seemed muted and distant. Mary felt an odd floating sensation, then her children slipped from her grasp and she plunged into darkness.

“Damn it! It got her!” Will shouted. He had hopped out of the APC the moment Jake stopped and was now leading the charge toward the house. The golem loomed over the woman, raising a huge ax for a killing blow while the children knelt by their mother's side, wailing.

In a flash Nails hurled over Will's head and barreled into the golem. They tumbled back into the house with a horrendous crash; immediately Will heard the bell-like tones that meant Nails was battering the metal man with all his might.

Will knelt at the woman's side and repressed a gasp. An enormous vertical gash ran up her right

side over her shoulder blade. She was drenched in her own blood. The girl of about seven and the boy, at most three, were shaking her arms, trying to wake her. When Will approached the boy shrank away and the girl threw herself protectively over her mother.

“Don’t hurt my mommy!” she cried.

Will’s heart broke. “Marc! Stretcher! NOW!” he shouted over his shoulder, then turned back to the girl. “It’s ok! We’re good guys. We’re going to help,” he said as gently as he could.

“The monster hurt my mommy! I want my daddy!” the girl wailed.

Will blinked back tears as he looked the surrounding area over again. Jake and Marc were coming at a run with a stretcher. Cynthia was right behind them with a first aid kit. The twisted bell chorus of Nails fighting the golem still emanated through the front door even as the glow of the rapidly-spreading fire within began to radiate from the windows.

Jake dropped at the woman’s side and began examining her. “This is bad,” he said without thinking, then glanced at the girl. She appeared not to have heard. “Marc, pressure here, now! Cynthia, kit!”

Seconds ticked past as Jake fought to stabilize the woman. “That’s all I can do,” he said finally. Marc moved to the woman’s feet and he and Jake quickly shifted her, still face-down, onto the stretcher.

Immediately the girl began to cry again. Cynthia ran to her side and took the girl’s tiny hands in her own.

“Sweetie, we’re going to help your mom,” she said. “We’re going to do everything we can for her, so we need you to be brave, ok?”

“I want my daddy!” the little girl sobbed. Her wails were joined by the sound of approaching sirens in the distance.

“We need to go, right now,” Will said. Here and there lights were coming on in windows in nearby houses. A few onlookers even stepped out of front doors. By now the garage and first floor of the house were burning freely. “Grab the family and let’s move!”

Jake and Marc hoisted the woman; Cynthia took the girl’s hand and whispered something soothing.

“Nails, time to bug out!” Will shouted. He desperately hoped that none of the neighbors had video cameras. He held one hand out to the boy and said, “Let’s go, buddy.”

“No!” the boy shouted, turned and ran across the lawn away from the team.

“Timmy!” shouted the girl. She twisted free of Cynthia’s grasp and began to follow her brother. Will caught her around the waist and held her as she struggled to get free.

By now Timmy was most of the way across the lawn, heading for the scraggly row of bushes that separated the grass from the scrub of the desert that stretched behind the house. As he went he pulled off his shirt; by the time he reached the bushes he was fumbling with his shoes.

“Timmy, no!” the girl screamed. “We’re not s’pposeda *change*!”

Timmy gave his sister a defiant look, pulled off his last shoe and dove into the bushes.

“Nails, *now*!” Will shouted as he handed the frantic girl to Cynthia and ran for the bushes. Cynthia cradled the child in her arms as she hurried to catch Marc and Jake where they were loading the woman into the APC.

Will fell to his knees next to the bushes and tried to spot Timmy, but all he could see was the rustling of branches. When he reached into the foliage something burst through the other side and scurried away. Will stood and was surprised to see not a boy but what looked like a small gray dog fleeing into the desert.

With no time left to ponder this new piece of the puzzle Will turned and sprinted back to the APC. Presently a final resonating gong came from the house, which was now virtually engulfed in flames, and Nails dashed out of the house on foot to rejoin the team. By now it seemed the entire neighborhood was gawking at the spectacle from their own houses.

Nails leapt into the APC and dropped into a seat as Jake stomped in the gas pedal. The sirens were uncomfortably close now as the APC rumbled to the end of the street and turned north toward the highway.

“Where’s the kid?” Jake asked over his shoulder.

“He got away,” Will said. “He turned into a wolf cub.”

Cynthia, who was kneeling on the floor with her hands next to the wounds on the woman’s outstretched body, looked up at him. “These people are werewolves?”

Everyone except Jake looked at the girl, who was cringing under an instrument panel behind Cynthia, hugging her knees. “We’re not s’pposda change. No one’s s’pposda know,” she whimpered over and over again to herself.

“She’s in shock,” Jake said. “We need to get these two to a hospital.”

Will looked at Cynthia, who had closed her eyes. He knew she was trying to heal the wound, but he wondered how much good she could do for such a horrific injury.

“What happened?” he asked Nails. The big fellow’s clothing was singed all over, in some places completely burned away.

“There are two of them,” he said.

Jake looked at the others in the rearview mirror. “That’s not good.”

“Tell me about it,” Nails muttered.

“George, any updates?” Will asked.

“*Plenty, none of it good,*” George said grimly over the Jakecams™. “The news channels are buzzing with updates about a kidnapping/arson event. The reports are varied, but almost all mention a ‘tank’ and armed individuals fleeing the scene with a woman and a screaming child.”

“Oh, *good,*” groaned Jake. “We try to save lives and instead end up redefining the word ‘fiasco’.”

“*We’ve also heard from Detective King.*”

Will tilted his head. When the Winds had learned that their mission this evening would involve going directly into a residential area, George had called Detective King to put him on alert. “What did he say?”

“*A 119 call alerted the authorities. King requested to be part of the escort sent to pick up Mr. West.*”

“They’re picking him up?” said Jake. “Wouldn’t it be quicker to just call him and say his house is on fire and they think his family’s been kidnapped?”

“*Ordinarily, yes, but it appears that Mr. West did not react well to the news and a contingent was sent to ensure his safety. There is also apparently some concern over why his family was attacked and if Mr. West would not be better off in police care.*”

“That saves us worrying about him, then,” said Jake. “The downside being the golems are still loose and we don’t know how to find the little boy.”

“So what the hell do we do?” rumbled Marc.

Will thought for a moment before saying, “George, call the Detective.”

About half an hour later Detective King’s beige two-door pulled up in front of the remains of the West residence. The vehicle was much like its owner: weathering its years quite well and devoid of superfluous details.

The West house was in ruins, thoroughly gutted and blackened in most places. King had barely come to a stop before his passenger door flew open and Rick West jumped out and ran through the blockade of police and fire vehicles. Mr. West was quite average-looking, of average height and build in an ordinary business suit. The only thing extraordinary about his appearance was the look of grief on his face as he fell to his knees in the grass with his hands clasping his hair. The police and firemen nearby could only look on grimly at the man sobbing in front of the smoldering remains of his home.

Detective King made his way past the barricades calmly, with his usual measured gait. He walked to the side of the grieving man and gently laid one large hand on a heaving shoulder.

“Why would anyone do this?” Rick sobbed.

“I can’t tell you that, son,” King answered. “I *can* tell you that we’ll do everything we can for your family.”

“Tell me again what happened,” Rick pleaded.

King reached into his trench coat and took out a large PDA. Flipping the cover open, he began to read.

“At 8:27 pm, 119 received a call from this residence stating that a ‘man with an ax’ was attempting to break in. Two minutes later more calls came from neighboring residences, describing a house fire, a strange tank-like vehicle, several unidentified individuals and a great deal of screaming.” King looked steadily at the weeping man. “The individuals in the tank took your wife and daughter.”

“Where’s my son?” Rick asked, suddenly forceful.

“We’ve been over this, Mr. West,” King said. ‘You need to start giving us something to go on. Do you have any enemies? Know of anyone that would want to hurt your family?’”

“What happened to my *son*?” Rick demanded again.

King sighed and went back to his PDA. “There are a couple of accounts of one of the kidnappers chasing the boy into the hedges. After the group in the tank left, two very large men exited the house and were last seen walking into the open desert behind the residence.”

Rick lowered his hands to face level and looked past the house into the darkness beyond.

“Timmy?”

In a heartbeat he was on his feet and running to the hedges, calling for his son.

“Mr. West!” Detective King called after him and began to follow. Before he had even reached the hedges Rick had waded through them and was sprinting into the desert beyond. King stopped at the bushes and watched the man in formal wear scampering over the arid scrub, calling frantically for his son.

King shifted to look over his shoulder at the other civil servants, who were looking back at him with expressions of shock and dismay. “Is this part of your plan?” he growled at the Jakecam™ concealed in his breast pocket.

“*Not really*,” Will whimpered back, barely audible.

King drew his service revolver from its holster and shouted back over his shoulder: “Hold here, I’ll bring him back!”

He powered his way through the bushes and was gone into the night.

Rick West tripped, slid and stumbled constantly as he made his way over the sand and scrub. Office shoes were definitely not the ideal things to be traipsing through the desert in, yet it never even occurred to him to take them off. His thoughts were completely clouded by fear and guilt: his only concern was to find his son and make sure he was ok.

“Timmy!” he called again and again with his hands cupped to his mouth. “Timmy, where are you?”

Only the moaning of the wind and the chittering of insects answered him. Then, after what seemed to Rick an eternity of searching (but was, in fact, less than ten minutes) another sound became prominent: a rhythmic thumping on the sand, somewhere nearby and drawing closer.

“Who’s there?” Rick called. Under his breath he swore, cursing the cloud cover that had made the night so dark.

There was no answer, only the heavy thumping coming steadily toward him. Turning toward the sound and squinting, Rick finally saw what was making the noise: two huge silhouettes approaching him, almost lazily. In the hand of one Rick could just make out the glint of a massive ax. Then came a sound like the hiss of air as a blowtorch is lighted and in the blink of an eye flames erupted around the other figure, spreading into a corona that illuminated both figures and the surrounding area like a bonfire. Rick saw then something he could scarcely believe: it was not two men, but two great forms of iron, walking statues that came toward him.

“S-stay back!” Rick stammered. He stumbled while backing away from them, fell and scrambled back to his feet. The things were still coming toward him, the one brandishing its ax, the other causing small fires in the coarse vegetation.

Rick turned and ran. The thudding footsteps increased in tempo, keeping up with him, as he struggled over the rough terrain. Rick didn’t dare to look back and though he knew his pursuers must still be gaining on him, even now he could not bring himself to change and escape.

A shot rang out, accompanied by the whine of a ricochet. Rick spied the Detective hurrying across the sand, apparently having much less difficulty with the terrain than Rick had himself.

“Stop where you are!” he warned. When the metal men continued their quick march toward Rick, the Detective fired again twice. The heads of the two creatures jerked backward but they continued forward unabated.

“You’d better make it fast!” King said, but he didn’t seem to be talking to Rick.

“Death from above!” bellowed a new voice. At first Rick thought it must have been one of the metal men, but then he realized there was a newcomer among them. Another man, tall and dressed completely in black, had come from nowhere and was fighting the statue-things. Rick had not seen or heard him coming. What did he do, fall out of the sky?

“Mr. West! Let’s go!” Detective King called as he motioned for Rick to come with him.

Rick made his way to King’s side as quickly as he could. “What the hell is going on here?” he blurted.

“There’s no time to explain,” answered King. “I need you to come with me, right now.”

Rick looked at the man in black, dodging with dizzying speed around the sluggish attacks of the impossible marauders. At first hesitant, he ran to join Detective King. Together they ran not back toward Rick’s neighborhood, as he would have expected, but deeper into the open desert. Behind them the sky glowed with the light of many small fires and the air resonated with the peal of fists pounding automata of iron.

Again, time passed impossibly slowly for Rick. At first he assumed that the Detective knew what he was doing leading them into the night, but as the seconds crawled by panic began to rise within him again.

“Where are we going?” he asked suddenly through his shortness of breath.

“It’s just a little further,” the Detective replied.

“*What’s* a little further?” Rick said, exasperated. “What the hell were those things? Where’s my family? *What the hell is going on?*”

Detective King slowed, peered ahead at something in the darkness, and stopped. “Maybe this will help explain things,” he said and waved his hand high in the air.

A set of high beams flared on ahead of them, momentarily blinding Rick. He staggered and fell to his back, shielding his eyes with his hands. As he blinked the sparks from his vision he heard a familiar voice that made his pulse skip:

“Rick!”

“Mary?”

Rick clambered to his feet and ran to the silhouette framed by the headlights. Mary’s face was strained, streaked with tears, her hair mussed, her blouse covered in blood. To Rick, she had never looked more beautiful. He threw his arms around her and she flinched backward with a small cry. “Sorry,” she whispered. This time, he hugged her more gently.

“Mary?” Rick said, bewildered. “What’s happening? Where are the kids?”

“Daddy!” Claire’s voice came from somewhere nearby. She came at a run around whatever vehicle was illuminating the strange reunion and threw her arms around her parents.

“It was awful, Rick,” Mary whispered. “These men broke into the house, tried to get us--we tried to run, but one of them hit me. These people saved us.”

“What people?” asked Rick. He was only just becoming aware that his family was surrounded by silent figures clad in black. “Who are you? Where’s Tim? Will someone please tell me what’s going on?”

“Mr. West,” Detective King said from behind Rick, startling him--with all that was happening he had all but forgotten the man was there.

“Detective, you know these people?” Rick asked, half questioning, half accusatory.

“Mr. West, if you and your family will reenter the APC, we can discuss the situation,” Detective King said evenly. “I think we both have some explaining to do.”

The interior of the APC was covered in weapon racks and instrument panels. To Rick it all looked like something out of a bad spy movie. He settled into a middle seat with his wife and daughter while three of the strangers and the Detective sat around them and the fourth, the bearded man, took the driver's seat.

"All right, start talking," Rick demanded.

"These are associates of mine," King began. "They are paranormal counter-operatives. They're called the Lonely Winds."

"Para-*what*?" Rick groused. It was clear that he was trying to seem incredulous, but he lacked the acting talent to make it remotely believable.

"*With all due respect, Mr. West,*" said a new voice, "*we are well beyond any point wherein feigning ignorance is even remotely appropriate.*"

The new voice had seemingly emanated from thin air. It took Rick a moment to realize that it had actually come from a series of speakers mounted throughout the vehicle. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is George Manor. I am the mentor of the people that saved your family's lives."

"Saved them from *what*?! Those things out there?"

"They're called golems, Mr. West," said the bearded man. "We've been fighting and tracking them for several days now. My name is Jake. This is Cynthia, Marc, and Will."

"What is this, some kind of sick joke?" Rick scoffed.

"Man, if you don't settle down and start listenin', I'm gonna have to get rough," growled Marc.

"Easy, big dog," said Jake. "Whether you want to accept it or not, sir, the plain fact is that your entire family has been targeted for extermination."

"Extermination? By what?"

The Lonely Winds exchanged glances for a few moments. It was Cynthia who finally spoke up.

"Two nights ago, we were patrolling downtown. Will was trailing a vampire."

Rick scoffed again. "A vampire?"

"Don't interrupt, this is where it gets good," Jake said.

Cynthia swallowed, took a breath, and continued.

"While Will was following him, somebody new showed up. He turned out to be one of those things, wrapped in clothing for a disguise. He was after the vampire, too, but then he came after Will.

"We fought the thing for a long time. We finally managed to kill it, but..." She trailed off.

"Cynthia is psychic," Will said. "When we studied the golem after defeating it, she learned some very upsetting things."

"Psychic. Right. Is she going to tell me my fortune? Is this the part where you people tell me I have to pay you money to make the bad vibrations go away?" Rick said.

Jake grimaced. Who did this guy think he was trying to fool?

"It's true, Rick," Mary whispered. Slowly she pulled away from her husband, turned in her seat and pulled up her shirt in back, exposing her huge, ugly new scar. Claire, already asleep on her lap, shifted and whimpered.

"That was an ax wound," Mary said. "It almost killed me. Cynthia healed me. She thinks she can even make the scar fade with a little more time."

Rick looked disbelievingly at the skin he knew for a fact had been unblemished before. "How...is this...?"

"It's very real, Mr. West," Will said. "So are the things that attacked your family tonight."

"What are they?" Rick asked, without any hint of pretense.

"To use the cliché explanation, golems are like magical robots," said Jake. "They're statues, inanimate matter, brought to life using powerful magic."

"When I touch things, I can learn their history," Cynthia said. "If someone has touched it, I can get bits and pieces of what they were thinking, too. When I touched the first golem, what I saw in it...scared me."

"What did you see?" Mary asked in a hush.

"An army," Cynthia replied, just as softly. "Golems are supposed to be hard to make, but in the

place this one comes from there were crowds of them.

“There was also...I sort of saw into the golem’s mind. It was really simple, kind of like those computer programs they make you write in high school, you know? Go here, do this, like a list, but with priorities for different things.

“I wrote down what I saw. The next night we went to one of the places on the list and found another golem. When we killed it I read it again and I got something new: anger.

“The golems are being sent out from somewhere. Every day, they go back to hide. When this one had gone home, the one that made it had touched it, so I got some of what he was thinking at the time. He’s *pissed*.”

“I don’t understand. What does any of this have to do with us?” asked Mary.

“The maker has a plan,” answered Cynthia. “He’s...he wants to get rid of monsters. ‘The plague of the land,’ he calls them. The golems are being sent out to test them. When one of them didn’t come back, the maker was furious. He was testing the golems against targets that nobody would miss, but now he’s scared to death that something bad has happened. He’s speeding up his tests. One of them was to see if a golem team could go right into a nice neighborhood and kill someone and get away. He sent them after you.”

“Which leaves us with one primary question,” said George. “Why were you, specifically, targeted?”

For a moment Rick stared at the nearest speaker. Then, all at once, he completely lost his composure, weeping openly into his hands.

“It’s my fault! It’s all my fault!” he sobbed. “I never wanted anything like this to happen.”

“How is it your fault?” Jake asked.

“My family,” sniffled Rick. “My whole family is...after all these years, I still can’t believe I’m saying this...we’re cursed. We can change into wolves.”

“How long has this been so?” asked George.

“Generations. My grandfather used to tell me stories about how *his* grandfather would take him into the mountains and they’d run through the woods all night. But growing up, we were always told never to change in front of others. We *never* let anyone see us as wolves.”

“Your son changed, Mr. West,” Will said. “He turned into a wolf cub and fled.”

“He was just frightened!” Mary protested.

“No one is making accusations,” said George. “The fact remains, however, that your natures have been divined--perhaps literally--and your lives are in mortal danger as a result. Our own priorities now become the location of the child and the destruction of the rampant homunculi.”

Mary blinked twice. “Does he always talk like that?”

“Not always. Sometimes he goes on for pages,” muttered Jake.

“We find it’s best to smile politely until he stops,” Cynthia said dryly.

“Getting back to the task at hand,” grumbled Detective King.

“Quite right. Nails, can you hear me?” said Jake.

“Loud and clear, gadget man.”

“How’s it going?”

“I tussled with the lunkheads for a while, but now I’m just running rings around them. It’s like shadowboxing with molasses.”

“Can you see our lights?” Will asked.

“Sure.”

“Head our way, then. We need to finish these two off before they manage to surprise us.”

“Got it.”

“You can stop them, right?” Mary said, almost pleading.

“We’ll do what we can,” Jake said.

“What you *can*?” Rick grated. “You just said you know how to fight these things!”

“We will do our best, Mr. West,” said Will. “We have weapons, but it’s not that simple. You don’t know what it’s like to try to kill one of these things. They don’t feel pain when you shoot them, or slow

down when you injure them. They don't eat, or sleep, or breathe..."

"*Destroying the golems is only your first problem,*" said George. "*Once they are dealt with, there is no guarantee, indeed, no cause at all to believe, that no further incursions will be sent against you.*"

"What? Is he saying that more of these things are going to come after us?" said Mary, aghast. In her arms, Claire moaned and stirred.

"Look, our son is missing, our home has been destroyed, what more do you people want?" demanded Rick.

Three knocks on the side door startled Rick and Mary. At the flip of a switch by Jake the door slid open, revealing Nails.

"They're right behind me. You'd better get ready," he said.

"Oh, I'm ready," chuckled Jake as he shifted in his seat and activated the weapons console.

Outside in the cool night air the two men of iron marched relentlessly toward the lights of the vehicle in the distance. The enemy that had taunted them had fled in that direction before disappearing. What semblance of reasoning they were capable of spurred them in that direction, looking for both the foe and the prey that had evaded them.

When a peal of thunder suddenly rolled across the desert it caused no consternation to the golem's dull intellect, but when heavy missiles fell from the sky and erupted in huge balls of flame on the ground they took notice, diverging in courses leading away from each other. More thunder came and the desert became alive with plumes of fire. They struck all around the golems and the odd shot hit them directly. The barrage became a virtual rain of fire from the heavens, battering the golems with explosions meant to cripple stout vehicles and topple small buildings. The ponderous movement of the golems was no aid to them: it was not long before the shells were falling upon heaps of metal, blasted and melted so they no longer held the shapes of men at all.

"That should do it," Jake said. "I'm not showing any movement at all out there now."

"I'd better get going," said Detective King.

"What's your cover story?" asked Will.

"What do you think?" huffed King. "Mr. West Went loopy and ran off. I went after him and couldn't find him or anything else. Then this crazy light show on the horizon sent me running to call for backup."

"*That sounds serviceable. Let me know how it works. Godspeed,*" George said.

Detective King hopped out the side door and signaled for Jake to close it behind him. Before the hatch was sealed King was already jogging back toward the neighborhood lights.

"What did he mean, he couldn't find me?" Rick asked warily.

"*The Detective used to be part of the active team, back when the harnessing of fire was a controversial new issue,*" said George.

"*I heard that!*" King's un-amused voice came over the Jakecam™ network. George continued unabated.

"*Unfortunately, Detective King is forced to keep his association with us a secret. His talent for concocting plausible stories to cover our activities has been invaluable to us in the past.*"

"But why didn't we just go back with him?" asked Mary.

"*I'm afraid that's an unacceptable course of action. We cannot allow you to return,*" George apologized.

"What?" Rick blurted. "This is kidnapping!"

"*Not at all, Mr. West. We would never think of infringing on your rights. Should you insist upon it, you and your family will be free to go.*"

To emphasize the point, Jake reopened the side door.

"*The fact remains, however,*" continued George, "*that your dilemma is not resolved. If you so choose you are free to return to your burned home, where more golems may be heading at this very moment. You can struggle to rebuild your lives under the shadow of the possibility that you may be*

*attacked again at any time, anywhere, for the rest of your lives. Or, you can listen to my alternative."*

Rick sighed. "All right, what is that?"

*"First, we must find your son and ensure his wellbeing. Fortunately, we know how to do this."*

"How's that?" asked Jake.

*"By giving him what any lost child wants most. His mother."*

Cynthia, Will and Marc accompanied Mary out into the night. Cynthia searched the dark wasteland with the power of her mind for any sign of the boy, as well as staying wary of any sign of golems approaching. Nails had gone off on his own to make certain the first golems were truly destroyed and recover the remains.

The group searched for quite a while, working back and forth across the scrub with Mary calling Timmy's name. Cynthia was very relieved when she finally felt a new presence. When she told the others of it, the hope and fear that Mary exuded at once was almost palpable.

They followed Cynthia to a cluster of bushes that rustled as they came near. Slowly, Mary knelt beside them.

"Timmy?"

A tiny snout protruded from the brush, where wide brown eyes regarded Mary. Then the wolf cub sprang from the bushes into her arms. Frightened whimpers became sobs as in moments the cub became a boy.

Without needing to be told Nails flew above and behind the APC on the return trip to the Mansion, carrying the remains of the two golems. The two had been blasted unrecognizable by Jake's bombardment and were now harmless, but there was no need to traumatize the Wests any further by making them spend time in close proximity to the things.

When the Winds arrived at the Mansion, George, Sullivan and G.R. were waiting for them in the Foyer. With them was someone none of the Winds had seen before, a petite woman in a flowing lavender gown, with golden hair like sunshine. Cynthia realized that she knew this woman from somewhere: this was the person depicted on the lighter George had forgotten by the fire when they met Nails and G.R. in the mountains.

"Esteemed societal defenders, soon-to-be refugees and others, allow me to introduce my colleague, Illana," George said. "Everyone please follow me to the Rec Room. We have a great deal to discuss."

The group settled into the Rec Room, where Sullivan brought food to the Wests. Timmy ate his sandwich with gusto and quickly fell asleep in Mary's arms. Claire gnawed half-heartedly at the contents of her own plate before snuggling next to Rick and sitting quietly.

"I don't understand," Mary was saying. "Why do we have to leave? Can't we just stay with relatives?"

"We can't just disappear!" said Rick. "I have work tomorrow! We have to file insurance claims for the house, tell our families what's happened--"

"Man, you just don't get it, do you?" Marc suddenly blurted and hauled himself out of his chair. "This isn't some game! There are more of those things out there, a lot more. They aren't out for a walk because it's nice outside, they're coming to kill you!"

The reformed skinhead moved closer to the Wests, looming over them. "You can't get away from these freaks by pretending nothing happened. You *sure* as hell aren't going to scare them with insurance forms! The only thing you can do is run the hell away."

"My husband and I can provide for you," Illana said. "It will take some getting used to, surely, but we will make the transition as easy as we can."

"Yeah, who are you again?" Rick said.

"Illana is a very old friend of mine," replied George.

"Very old? She looks about twenty!" said Mary.

"I look good for my age," Illana said with a smile.

"I trust Illana as few others," George said. "The golems may in fact be able to track you nearly anywhere, but Illana can take you somewhere they cannot follow."

"It's not forever," Illana said reassuringly. "We'll come back when George and his students have made sure it's safe for you."

"What about our families? They must be worried sick about us already!" Mary cried.

"If you write letters to your loved ones, I can make sure they are delivered," said Illana. "For now, it's best we get going. The sooner we get off the enemy's radar, the better."

"Can you at least tell us where we're going?" groaned Rick.

"That will be easier to explain once we've arrived," Illana said and pointed to an open area of the room. "Please, gather over there."

As the Wests reluctantly complied George went to Illana and gave her a hug. "It's been good to see you again," he said. "Tell the Captain I said hello."

"Of course. Any message for the others?"

George grimaced for a fraction of a second. "Tell them...I'll visit soon."

Illana smiled and hugged George again, then moved to stand next to the Wests. "You sure this is ok to do here?" she asked with a look around.

"I'll make it ok," said George. "Take care of you."

"Always." Illana raised her arms and closed her eyes. For a moment she stood that way, still and silent: then, just as Rick began to ask what they were waiting for, there was a flash of pale blue light, a sharp *pop!* and the group had vanished.

"Holy--was that some kind of mass teleport spell?" Jake asked in awe.

"A superior one, actually," said George. "Whomever is creating the golems, his reach will have grown quite long if he tries to attack them where they have gone."

"The plot thickens. You never told us you knew a powerful sorceress," Will said, almost accusatory.

"Quite right," replied George.

"Well! Time for the next installment of Evil Conspiracy: Golem Edition, am I right?" said Jake.

"You are indeed," George said. "Nails, if you please."

Nails left with a nod. Within moments he returned bearing the remains of the two golems. He dropped them unceremoniously on the floor between the group: even on the shag rug, they made deep, resonating tones.

"It's a bad thing, isn't it? That there were two of them," said Nails.

"That is one of many questions before us," George said. "Are you ready, Cynthia?"

"Yes." Cynthia knelt next to the remains and, laying her hands on one of them, closed her eyes. Seconds ticked by in silence as the team waited to hear what the psychic had learned.

"Anything?" Jake finally asked.

Cynthia's brow furrowed, but she did not open her eyes. "It's...weird."

She moved her hands to the other remains and breathed softly. "There's...it's..."

"It's all right," George said softly as he sat down next to Cynthia. "There's no rush. Can you tell us what it is you see?"

"The land is sick," Cynthia said. "Sick, diseased, run through with an ailment no one will treat. No one but me." The others drew back slightly, for though Cynthia spoke in her own voice it was with an unusually harsh tone, in a cadence and archaic dialect that were certainly not hers.

"I can see the wickedness where others cannot," she droned. "I have the power, and the will, to stop it. I will do what needs to be done. What *must* be done."

George raised a hand as if to touch Cynthia, but did not make actual contact. "Cynthia, perhaps you should--"

"Father!" Cynthia screamed in the speech that was not her own. "I'm carrying on your work! I'm walking in your footsteps! I'm healing the land! Are you proud of me? Can you see me?"

"Cynthia!" George shouted as he clapped his hands onto her shoulders.

“*Father!*” Cynthia shrieked just before George pulled her away from the golem. She flopped limply onto her back and lay there, panting and staring at the ceiling.

“What the hell was all that?” Marc said.

“Could you give us a moment?” George asked. “I think she could use some air.”

Somewhat reluctantly, the team did as they were bidden. Even Sullivan departed. When G.R. turned at the door to look back at Cynthia, Nails gently laid a hand on his shoulder and lead him out.

After a few moments, Cynthia’s breathing slowed and she sat up.

“What happened?” George asked.

“Sorry,” Cynthia said meekly. “I was trying to find out more about these things, but the more I look the more I never get anything new.”

“The images are fragmented, incoherent?”

Cynthia frowned. “Right, like usual, but there’s...I get other things besides images. I get pieces of people’s feelings and thoughts and stuff, but there’s no pattern to it. Like, if I touch a painting, I might get what the painter was thinking about, but it might be about *making* the painting, or about what he had for lunch, or other...stuff, if he was really horny.”

“You get a lot of that from artists?” George asked, smirking.

“Don’t get me started. Artists are creepy.”

The smirk faded. “What did you see here?”

“That’s the thing. Every time I touch one of the golems I get the same stuff about the maker over and over. ‘Kill the monsters.’ ‘Purify the land.’ ‘Do Father’s work.’ Over and over again, like it’s all he can think about.”

“Whose father? What work?”

“I don’t know!” Cynthia huffed in frustration. “I should be able to get that, names or faces or *something*, but I just get the same garbage every time I look. It’s like, this isn’t a regular mind, it has this weird quality that...damn it, I don’t have words for it!”

“It’s all right, Cynthia. Can you compare it to anything?”

“It was...echoes. This mind echoes. Does that make any sense?”

“Not yet, but I’m guessing it will, given time.”

“Ok.” Cynthia folded her legs together and looked at the ruined golems as though they were something utterly repulsive. “Do you want me to try again?”

“Not yet. Take some time to gather yourself. In a while we will try again, carefully.”

“What do we tell the others?”

George looked at the room’s door, beyond which he knew the others were likely waiting eagerly for news. “We tell them we’re not done yet. Whatever secrets these husks may conceal, we will search until we are certain we have learned all that we can.”

“Are you going to help with the psychometry?”

“Yes, I will try to guide you as much as possible.”

“Ok. Even if we find out where they’re coming from, how are we going to stop them all?”

“That,” George said, “I wish I knew.”