

My name is Cynthia Arden. I'm sure of it.

That probably sounds like a weird thing to say. Trust me, it's even weirder to have to keep saying it as a reminder. Bear with me, I'll try to explain.

Late last night the team and I broke into a secret lab owned by this big company, the Russell Foundation. Turns out, they aren't all the nice guys they say they are in the commercials.

So, we rush into the lab and there're two golems in there killing everybody. The guys do their thing and take the golems on. Nails wrestled with the thunder golem and started beating on it. It had this aura of electricity around it so as soon as Nails started fighting with it he was getting burned. That made him pretty mad.

While that was going on, the other guys were shooting out the cameras in the lab, shouting at the people who were running around screaming to get to safety, and flanking the other golem. That one had this bid wicked mace in its hand. The guys kept firing at it, but mostly that just made a lot of noise.

Nails was doing his thing, pounding on the first golem, hitting it so hard he left marks from his fists in it. Sometimes the cloth from the golem's clothing got pressed right into the marks. It scares me a little sometimes when he gets like that. Nails is a nice guy, you understand, but anymore when he fights, he gets so angry...

The golem kept trying to hit Nails back, but he was too fast for it. That's the other thing about watching him fight, it's like those cheesy martial arts movies where one guy fights like twenty people but they never manage to touch him. Still, all that electricity arcing around was doing a number on him and his clothing. He started to get *really* mad. He started to go all-out, where he moves like a hummingbird, so fast he's just a blur you can't even follow any more.

As soon as Nails does that, the other golem turned and started walking to the back of the lab, where all the safes are. The guys let him go so they could help Nails. Nails tripped his own golem and ran so Jake could shoot it with a bunch of rockets. I felt the pulse of broken magic in the air that meant the golem was finished and gave the guys a thumbs up.

The mace golem got to the back wall and started tearing open safes. The guys wanted to go after it, but I told them to wait. It ripped doors off of the safes one by one until it found the imprint.

Oh, the imprint. That's what this has all been about and no one even knew it. I only knew about it because I got it second hand from someone else's mind.

It goes like this: with magic, just like with technology, you can make artificial intelligence. You need a lot of power and a lot of know-how to do it, but it's possible. George says that really powerful wizards can "imprint" these personalities they create into objects that are magically animated. That way, you can make your magic book talk to you, or make your golem have a personality like a real person. Wizards that get really good at doing this can make all kinds of complex personas (that's George-talk). Some of them will even give enchanted objects copies of their *own* personalities. That can be because a wizard is really full of himself, but it can also be useful. If you want your tools to help you in your work, it can be very helpful if they think just like you do.

This imprint we came after? It was an imprint of the guy that's been making the golems. He took this big rock and tried to copy his whole mind into it, kind of like making a computer backup disk. The problem is, it's an incomplete copy. I don't know if the guy screwed it up or got interrupted or what, but the copy is seriously flawed. It's intelligent, it has a lot of his personality aspects, but it's not complete. It's a lot like a computer program, trying over and over to complete a goal without being able to learn and adapt.

When we stopped the golems that were sent to kill the West family, we got a huge break. George helped me read the dead golems long enough to get all of this information out of them. For whatever reason I've had a really hard time getting anything out of the things' minds. I *should* be able to learn all kinds of things about the golems' maker, but what I've been getting from the remains are really fragmented.

It took us a lot of work, but we finally managed to put all of this together. Since the West golems were sent out recently, I was able to finally get some of their maker's plans out of them. That's how I knew about the imprint and where to find it.

Apparently, the golems' creator lost hold of the imprint at some point. Somehow it changed hands until the Russell Foundation ended up with it. Somebody there knew it was more than it seemed, but they didn't have the means to study it, so they locked it up in one of their labs to keep it safe and watched. The maker found out about it somehow and sent a team to either get it or destroy it.

That's what the mace golem did. When it saw that we were a serious threat, it followed its instructions to make sure that no one else could use the imprint against its creator. That meant grabbing it out of the safe, dropping it on the floor and smashing it.

Once that was done I let the guys take down the golem. Jake's been itching to try out his new weapons anyway. The golem-maker probably thought that destroying the imprint would keep anyone else from learning anything from it. I grabbed a large piece of it and we took off.

The imprint wasn't hard to read. I got the whole story from it, everything that's been happening. Over the years I've seen some weird things, but this really blew my mind.

I told George and the others what to prepare for. Tomorrow night we're going to war. Tonight everyone else is back at the Mansion resting while I came to the city. George would have a conniption if he knew I came here by myself, but I had to see something that's going down tonight.

See, when I read the West golems a lot of stuff hit me at once. One thing I had known before but didn't really understand made sense to me then. It's that when the golems are sent out into the world, they're given a list of tasks. Each task has a level of priority, so a golem might drop one activity to do something more important. The thing was, every single golem I've read has always had the same order with the highest priority: "Kill the Crown of Thorns."

You remember her, right? I've only seen her the one time. For real, I mean. She likes to use decoys.

I thought the golems were told to hunt her down because she's a monster, but there's more to it than that. The golem-maker and the Crown, they have history.

That's why I came tonight. The golem-maker thought he knew where the Crown would be and he sent a team of golems. He's hoping they'll take her apart. I don't think it's going to work, but I had to see it.

I drove to near where the fight was going to be and found a spot to park. Then I got onto a nearby rooftop and waited. The spot was an empty lot, all gravelly and overgrown. What was left of a cinderblock wall ran down one side with some old tires leaning against it. I had seen some depressed parts of town, but this took the cake. The place was so run down that it looked more abandoned than anything else.

I didn't have to wait long before I heard them coming. Thump, thump, thump. Those footsteps are like the drumbeat of an old-school heavy metal concert. They always give me shivers.

Soon enough I could see them. There were five of them this time. That alone was scary. George keeps talking about how hard it is to make a golem. You have to be a powerful wizard, you need a huge amount of power, yadda yadda. But we still keep seeing more and more of them. We'd all been wondering just how many resources the golem-maker had. The imprint told me. The answer to that is scary, too.

Five golems marched into the lot and stopped. I still don't get why their maker thinks it makes them inconspicuous to put them in old clothes and hats. That just makes them look like groups of huge guys that walk like robots.

They stood there for a while like statues. Regular statues, I mean. I waited with them, but the Crown never showed up. Guess the maker's not that great a fortuneteller.

It took a long time, but the group finally headed back. I followed them as they marched through downtown. Nobody tried to mess with them, which made me grateful. The imprint showed me what these things will do to people that get in their way, whether they deserve it or not.

I followed them to near the docks, in one of the parts of town where the roads and buildings are really old. They went straight to a grate covering an old sewer entrance in a hillside. When they got there, they stopped. A big sack had been left on the ground right where the grate bars were broken open to make a hole. The head golem poked the bag with some kind of long blade that came out of its arm and about six

golem heads rolled out of it. All of them had thorny vines wrapped around their heads. Figures. The bitch loves to remind everyone that she's always ten steps ahead of them.

The golems gathered up the sack and marched through the gate. I wanted to follow them but I didn't quite dare. It was pitch black inside and if another group came along I'd be trapped. Guess Will's caution is rubbing off on me.

It doesn't matter now. I know where to bring the team tomorrow night. I still can't decide if I should tell them all that I've seen or let them see it for themselves. Either way it's going to scare the hell out of them.

In the meantime, I'm still trying to keep my thoughts straight. I'm Cynthia, damn it.

The imprint didn't just give me useful information, it shoved it down my throat. George explained it like this: I can read information in things, kind of like how a stereo can read information on a CD when all a person can see is plastic. The thing is, the imprint doesn't just contain information, it's specifically meant to give it out. When I opened my mind to read it, it tried to upload the entire mind within right over my own. I got *really* disoriented for a while, even worse than when I read the West's golems.

It started to wear off pretty fast and George says it shouldn't cause any permanent damage. That's just peachy. In the meantime I've still got two people's minds in my head. I keep getting little flashes of this other person. Sometimes I have cravings for foods I've never eaten. I remember a house, a relationship, a whole lifetime that wasn't mine.

I even got a whole sad story out of the one golem, the one with the lightning powers. Lucky me, I got to see a whole little home movie of the thing hunting down and killing some poor homeless man just because he happened to know a little magic.

I suppose I should be grateful. You could say that I literally know our enemy inside and out now. I know exactly what we're up against, not that it tells me how we're supposed to win. We're in for the fight of our lives tomorrow night. I really don't know whether to tell the others or let them see it for themselves. Either way it's going to scare the hell out of them.

In the meantime, I'm going to rest and try to sort out my thoughts. If Will knew how out of it I am he'd probably flip out and try to keep me from coming, but I need to be there. The stuff playing demolition derby in my head is the only warning they're going to get. All I have to do is focus, stop being confused for a split second every time I see a car or a light bulb, and remember that my name is Cynthia.

Not "Edmund."