

Time is often metaphorically compared to a river, but in truth it is more akin to a great lake. Every event in life is a stone dropped in the water, creating ripples in history. The larger the stone, the greater the waves it creates: the greater the act, the more lives it will impact.

Ages ago a proverbial large stone in Ylelon created ripples that would resonate throughout history to the modern day. As is so often the case, those in the path of the waves had no idea what was coming or what they would face until it was too late.

It was a cool evening in February of 2044 T.E. The Lonely Winds were on patrol in the southern stretches of the city. They had had no encounters of any sort for three days; the quiet tedium of the previous year had returned in the wake of Terek Domar killing Cinder and Simon and the destruction of the oracular idol, the Kad. Encounters with the supernatural had become comparatively rare for the team: perhaps occurring once or twice a week and being almost always isolated incidents involving only one or two vampires.

Tonight was no different. Will had zeroed in on a lone vampire prowling the downtown slums. The rest of the team coordinated to follow at a distance as Will trailed the monster through the streets, waiting for a chance to dispatch it out of view of any witnesses.

"He's turning south on 31st street now," Will reported presently. Frustration had begun to edge into his voice. No matter what turns the vampire took as he wandered the streets, there always seemed to be someone out walking or a group of people chatting on the steps of an apartment building. For as cold and as late as it was it seemed to Will that there should be far fewer people outdoors to begin with. The upside, Will supposed, was that the vampire was wandering because he had the same problem Will did: it was difficult to find a place to commit a lethal assault without witnesses.

After nearly an hour of tense pursuit Will caught sight of something that bothered him immensely: someone else had begun following the vampire. It was a massive man, considerably taller than Marc or Nails, broad in stature. His features were completely concealed under a long overcoat, baggy jeans, heavy boots and a brimmed hat. For his size the man was remarkably stealthy, keeping away from lights and weaving in and out of alley entrances. It was only the combination of Will's training and his heightened natural awareness that allowed him to spot the man to begin with.

"We have a potential problem," Will said while dividing his attention between the meandering vampire and the newcomer.

"*Did you get spotted?*" Jake whispered.

"No," Will said. "There's someone else here, following the target."

"*You sure you didn't just see me?*" rumbled Marc.

"No, it's not you. Whoever he is, he's good. We're following the same target and I've lost sight of him twice!"

"*Keep your distance then, Will,*" George advised. "*There are too many x-factors here for you to risk him spotting you in return.*"

"Don't worry, I don't think he's seen me. I've been keeping back behind them both."

"*Should we move to join you?*" asked Jake.

"Not yet. We'd be too conspicuous as a group. Stay with me and be ready to link up, we have no idea what this guy will try to pull."

Moments dragged by as the vampire hunted, the tall man stalked him and Will trailed them both. The vampire led them on a virtual scenic tour of the most rundown sections of the southern city. Will actually breathed a sigh of relief when the undead finally turned down a nearby alley. From his pace and body language Will surmised that he was extremely frustrated. As for the big man, who slipped into the alley twenty paces behind the vampire and thirty ahead of Will, the way he carried himself revealed only that he was ready for a fight.

"He's making a move! Follow and engage!" Will said and rushed to the alley entrance. The street was dark and quiet. None of the few people present on the street nearby seemed to be paying attention to him, so he rounded the corner and entered the alley.

The space was narrow and oppressively dark. Will stopped just inside the entrance with his pistols at the ready and waited. He saw no sign of either the vampire or the big fellow, but there was a strange sound in the air that Will felt as much as heard. It was a low buzzing, somewhat akin to the hum of electricity but less harsh, with an almost harmonic quality.

Carefully, Will began to inch forward, toward the sound. It grew steadily louder as he approached an overloaded dumpster that blocked his view of most of the alley. He side-stepped the refuse and froze.

Will had suspected that the man must be some sort of monster hunter himself. He had half-expected to see either the man surprising the vampire or the vampire overpowering the man.

What he had not expected to see was the spectacle of the man standing relaxed and casual in the alley, holding at arm's length, by the throat, the frantically struggling vampire. The dead man kicked and gasped vile curses through his choked-off windpipe but the giant seemed no more distressed than if he were holding a kitten. He raised his other hand, which Will now saw was haloed by red light, and punched the vampire, crushing his skull like a rotted melon.

Will's jaw dropped.

The big man nonchalantly dropped what was left of the undead to the alley floor and turned toward the alley entrance, hesitating only for a moment as he faced Will. The darkness under the man's hat hid his face but his left hand was still glowing as he came toward the monster hunter.

"Stay where you are!" Will commanded. The man continued to move forward.

"Last warning!" Will shouted as he took a step back so the dumpster covered his left flank. The man did not stop, so Will lowered his aim to knee level and fired. He heard the shot ricochet and was startled to have missed at such close range. He fired again twice: again he heard the bullets glance off of hard surfaces while the man moved unabated into striking distance.

Will ducked away from a swing that missed his face by a hair's breadth and slammed into the dumpster, leaving a huge dent. A follow-up punch missed by a much larger margin as Will retreated at a run.

"Watch it, subject is combative!" he reported as he headed for the street with the stranger hot on his heels. Marc startled him by stepping around the corner directly in front of him with his shotgun leveled.

"You don't say," he growled as he fired past Will, twice. Will heard the shots strike something metallic and thought as he spun to take aim again that Marc must have hit the dumpster, yet when he turned the big man was lying prostrate on the alley floor. Though both of his hands were now glowing, he was very still.

"You *killed him*?" Will exclaimed in horror.

"*Marc, what have you done?*" said George.

"*Hey, relax!*" Marc snarled. "The punk was about to take Will's head off! I just saved his life!"

Jake arrived then, puffing from the exertion of the run to catch up to the others. "What did I miss?" he asked.

"Marc just killed a man!" Will blurted.

"What, you mean the big guy that's getting up from the ground?" said Jake.

Will and Marc jumped away from the fallen man, who was already standing up again. Both of his hands now had the nimbuses of red energy. He stood, paused for a heartbeat and began to walk toward the three Winds.

"Freeze!" Jake said as he, Marc and Will all raised their weapons.

"Yeah, that won't work," Will said.

The stranger continued to walk toward them, so the Winds opened fire, blasting him at nearly point blank range. He jerked spasmodically and fell, accompanied by the sound of so many ricochets that the three men were nearly deafened.

"Scatter!" Will shouted as tendrils of smoke began to rise from the shreds of the body's clothing.

"But we don't--" Jake began.

"*Move!*" Will commanded.

The trio broke and ran down the sidewalk, sheathing their weapons as they went.

“We should try to find out what that was about!” huffed Jake.

“Jake, we need to get out of sight!” Will said. “We just discharged our weapons as a group in public view!”

“But we may not get another chance to find out what that was,” said Jake.

“Turn here,” Will said, guiding the three of them into the mouth of another alley. “Look,” he said as Marc leaned back around the corner to check the street, “I appreciate your wanting to evaluate the situation, but we can’t be seen like this! We just made more noise than a gang fight. The police will be here any minute.”

“Dude, we’re in the neighborhood that invented gang fights!” Jake argued. “Even if anyone bothered to call the cops over a few gunshots in the middle of the night, we’d still have time to--”

“Uh, guys?” Marc said. Will and Jake drew their weapons and peered around the corner, knowing what they would see: the stranger again approaching them, his tattered clothing still smoldering.

“Let’s move!” Will said.

The three men began to side-step down the ally away from the street, weapons at the ready.

“*What’s going on?*” Cynthia’s voice came over the Jakecams™.

“We’ve mowed this guy down twice and he keeps coming!” growled Marc.

“*I’m coming to help.*”

“No! Stay where you are. We’re falling back,” said Will.

The Winds continued their retreat down the alley. Presently the stranger came around the corner from the street, pursuing the monster hunters at the same steady pace with which he had followed the vampire. His hands began once again to glow with the red auras, beginning as barely visible points of light that quickly brightened until they lined the walls and floor around the man in pale red light.

“We’d better do something, quick!” Marc said.

“Running away works!” suggested Jake.

The team doubled their pace, leaving their pursuer trudging after them in the increasing distance without changing his pace, as though he were not at all concerned that they might escape him. At the far end of the alley the monster hunters turned left and broke into an all-out run.

“How do we know this guy is a threat?” asked Jake. “What happened to the vampire you were following? Maybe we should try talking instead of running away?”

“*The answer to both your first and second questions, Jake,*” George said, “*is that this man overpowered the vampire, crushed his head with a single blow and then committed assault with intent to commit great bodily harm to Will.*”

“Request for diplomacy withdrawn,” said Jake.

Now the trio was outright running through the darkened neighborhood. In the distance, under the streetlights, they could see the stranger’s massive silhouette still patiently trudging after them, drawing steadily closer.

“This guy isn’t giving up,” Jake said.

“He’s sure taking his sweet time about it!” growled Marc.

“He’s toying with us,” Jake opined. “It’s his way of letting us know he can track us down. It’s psychological warfare. We’re going to have to fight this guy soon so he knows who he’s dealing with.”

“*No, keep going. I’m guiding Cynthia to you to pick you up,*” George said.

“You want us to just run away?” Marc said.

“*You and Will shot your pursuer repeatedly at close range and didn’t even phase him. Running away seems your best option at this juncture.*”

Tires squealed as Cynthia’s green two-door roared around a nearby corner and sped toward the team. The three men slowed their paces only to see her speed past them and keep going. The giant had come uncomfortably close, which Cynthia amended in drastic fashion by side-swiping him, smashing her trunk into his legs and flinging him against the front wall of a nearby apartment building.

“Get in!” she cried as she flung open the passenger door. The three monster hunters began to cram themselves into the tiny car.

“Move it, guys!” Cynthia urged. She was watching the prone pursuer, who was once again

struggling back to his feet. His movements were very deliberate and slow, but smooth, showing no sign of any injury or pain.

Jake was last into the car, dropping into the passenger seat and hauling the door closed. "Go!"

Cynthia virtually stomped on the gas pedal. Her tires squealed and the car lurched forward just as the pursuer stood again. Without pause, he began to give chase, still marching after them even as they sped into the distance.

"What the hell is the deal with this guy?" Marc growled as he watched the pursuer while jamming fresh shells into his shotgun.

"That's no guy," Will said. "We must have put three dozen rounds into him at close range. Even good body armor won't let you shake that off."

"What should I do?" Cynthia asked. She had slowed to a crawl and was watching the stranger in the rear-view mirror.

"If he keeps plodding along like that, we'll lose him if we're not careful," Jake said. "Take us east, into the industrial parks."

Will looked from the pursuer to Jake. "You want to lure him to the factories? Why?"

"You want to leave him running loose?" Jake looked over his shoulder, out the rear window. "If we lose him, he may latch onto someone else. He killed a vampire, sure, but he also tried to kill *you*. So, while we've got his attention, let's take advantage of it. If he wants to duke it out, let's take him somewhere the ruckus won't bother anyone."

Cynthia turned a corner while still inching along the road. A group of three youths lounging on the steps of a nearby tenement turned to look at the car and began to laugh among themselves.

"What do you guys think he is?" Cynthia asked.

"Trying to eliminate witnesses," Jake said. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"*How do you figure, Jake?*" George prompted.

"Simple. He killed a vampire, which is all fine and dandy by our standards, but then he tried to kill Will. Tying up loose ends is the only thing worth the effort he's expending trying to catch us."

"You mean the part where he's walking like he's taking a pleasant Sunday stroll?" Will asked.

"I never said I thought he didn't have quirks."

Presently Cynthia's car passed out of the residential area and crossed the border of the industrial park, a sprawling array of the dark hulks of factories both occupied and abandoned. Always in the distance the stranger followed, relentlessly plodding along as though he had all the time in the world.

"Ok, speed up a bit now," said Jake.

"I don't wanna lose him!" Cynthia protested.

"You won't lose him, he's fixated on us," said Jake. "Just give him enough room so we have time to jump out when we're ready to work."

"What's the plan?" Marc asked as Cynthia steadily accelerated, slowly increasing the gap between her bumper and the tireless figure following it.

"Plan A," Jake explained, "is that we pile out in an empty lot somewhere and mow the chump down from cover."

"How? He's laughed off everything we've hit him with so far," said Will.

"Including my car," said Cynthia.

"Then we go to Plan B: Fist of Heaven."

"*All right!*" G.R. cheered over the Jakecam™ connection.

In the stillness of the chilly night Cynthia's car pulled into the lot of an old gas compressor plant. It turned just out of sight of the road around one corner of the immense, irregular building and parked a sprint's distance from the structure, whereupon the four brave souls within disembarked and scattered to hide among the detritus left alongside the structure from its days of industry.

Within moments the mystery figure appeared around the corner, slowing to a brisk walk when it spied the abandoned car. There was no hesitation in its gait as it approached the vehicle and leaned forward as if to peer inside.

A pistol shot rang out; the figure's head jerked to one side and the sound of a ricochet split the air. When the man turned and began to march in the rough direction the shot had come from, a shotgun roared twice from another direction; the man jerked in time with each report, but kept his feet.

"Doesn't anything get to this guy?" Jake said under his breath as he fired a quick burst from his sub-machineguns. The brute changed direction a third time, coming toward Jake. For one horrifying moment Jake thought it was going to plow into his hiding place and find him.

Then a piece of scrap flew out of nowhere and smacked into the back of the stalker's head. When the brute stopped abruptly and turned around, an old shovel hurled out of the darkness behind it and hit it square in the back. Again it turned: again a piece of salvage struck it from behind.

"Thanks, Cynthia," Jake whispered as he slunk away from his original hiding place.

"*No problem,*" she whispered back, just audible from the Jakecam™ over the sound of her steady barrage striking the creeper.

"I think she's got him busy," said Jake as he peered over another heap of rusted metal. "You guys ready?"

"Ready!" Marc rasped.

"All set," said Will.

Jake opened his backpack and took out a cobbled device that looked like a crude blending of a pistol and an old flashlight. He pointed it over the scrap heap at the creature, which was still, almost comically, twisting and turning in place toward anything Cynthia could toss at it, and pulled the trigger.

"This is Jake Osborn, requesting Fist of Heaven!" he said.

"*I've got the target lazed,*" said Will.

"*Time for an ass-kicking. Light him up!*" laughed Marc.

"Heads up, Cynthia!" Jake warned.

Cynthia's barrage abruptly stopped, leaving the brute surrounded by a collection of loose scrap. For only a moment, the giant stood his ground, looking back and forth along the building as through trying to remember where to go.

Then Nails descended from above, flying in a sharp arc that leveled out a split-second before he smashed fists-first into the stranger. The two drove straight at the nearest wall and crashed through it with a shriek of sheet metal, followed closely by a trio of ear-piercing cracks.

"Huh. Successful field test," Jake said.

Will and Marc were inching toward the hole in the wall, weapons ready. "Nails? Buddy? You ok?" Marc called.

"Yeah, I'm ok," Nails answered. He appeared at the hole, casually clapping dust from his hands. "I smacked the bastard against the floor a few times. Whatever he was, he's not moving now."

"That's a relief," said Will.

"Yeah, nice work!" Jake said as he and Cynthia jogged to join the others. "How did the goggles work?"

Nails held up a hand. He was twirling a set of goggles on one finger. "Like a charm! I could see the schmuck glowing a hundred feet up--"

A gloved hand clapped over Nails's face from the darkness of the warehouse while a massive arm wrapped around his shoulders. He was hauled backward into the shadows, which instantly filled with the sounds of a scuffle.

"Nails!" Marc shouted as he and the others surged through the opening while drawing their weapons and flashlights.

Nails and the stranger were grappling on the floor, wrestling back and forth wildly, hammering each other with thunderous blows. The red nimbuses had reappeared around the stalker's hands. They made a weird lightshow as they battered Nails, again and again.

"We can't get a shot!" Jake cried. He, Marc and Will had surrounded the savagely fighting duo and taken aim but could not fire for worry of hitting their teammate. Cynthia was framed by the hole in the wall, pistol pointed down, eyes on the fight.

Nails and the giant continued to grapple for breathless seconds until Nails, rolled onto his back

with his opponent atop him, managed to push back his foe's head with one hand under his jaw and deal him a crushing blow with the other hand. When the brute recoiled from the force of the attack, Nails folded one leg upward in a blink and kicked, flinging his enemy away. It hit the floor outside of the Winds' circle and made an odd sort of muted, hollow gonging noise.

Will kept his aim on the stranger as he glanced at Nails, who looked worse than Will had ever seen him. The features of his face were marred by huge bruises and burns. His black field outfit was torn and charred in half a dozen places. Will had seen Nails shrug off horrific injuries and survive immense amounts of punishment only to come back for more, but now he looked like someone who had been on the receiving end of a savage beating. There was something else about him, too: he looked more angry than any of the Winds had ever seen him.

Very deliberately, he reached up and plucked the Jakecam™ from his shoulder, then tossed it to Jake. He began to roll up his sleeves as the stranger stood and started walking toward the group--that maddening, steady pace.

Whatever he was, he was still concealed in his heavy clothing. Even his hat was still set firmly in place. As he came toward the team the glow around his hands began to increase in intensity until he was framed in that light, red features lined with black details. Even part of his face was revealed, a strong jaw that remained firmly set as he came forward and swung one humming fist at Nails.

Nails was ready. Faster than the eye could follow he raised a hand and struck the offending blow aside, then shifted to parry a follow-up punch from the stranger's other hand. Again and again Nails effortlessly slapped away the brute's attempts to strike him before quite suddenly delivering a blow of his own right to the stranger's face.

Just for a moment the stranger hesitated, as though Nails had stunned him. Then he raised a hand to continue his assault and Nails fell upon him with a ferocity that the others had rarely seen. He hammered his opponent with a flurry of punches, every one faster than the blink of an eye, powerful enough to shatter brick. The stranger jerked spasmodically with each blow, producing that strange muted gong noise each time. The barrage lasted only a few seconds before Nails finished with a crushing side kick that once again flung the man backward to crash against a support beam, which rang with a deep tone.

Nails wasn't finished. In a flicker he moved to pick up a metal rod that had been left abandoned on the dusty floor, then fell upon the stalker, beating him savagely about the head and shoulders with the makeshift club. Nine times he struck the giant, who made no move to fight back or defend himself. With Nails's last blow the stranger's arms fell limp against the floor and the glow around his hands faded to nothing.

Nails tossed away the mangled rod and walked back toward the rest of the team. "Sorry about that," he said. "Those punches felt like being hit in the face with a sledge hammer. That's on *fire*. Between that and trying to kill Will, he made me kinda mad. You ok, Will?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Will replied absently.

Unnoticed by anyone present, the stalker's fingers began to twitch.

"Can we take a closer look at him? I'd love to know what can stand up to such a beating from Nails," said Jake.

"Feel free," Nails muttered. "If you want to dissect him, I think you're going to need a chainsaw. I swear hitting this guy was like punching solid steel. What the hell *is* he?"

"Uh, guys," Marc said and pointed. The giant was standing again, shifting and pulling away from the beam, which actually had the imprint of his body pressed into it.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding!" said Jake.

"s'ok, I got it," Marc chuckled and stepped forward.

"*Marc, don't!*" George warned, too late: Marc had already tossed one of Jake's party favors at the approaching stranger. It struck him dead in the chest and burst, spreading liquid fire across his body in a ripple. In seconds all of his clothing was ablaze in a huge corona that half-lit the empty factory in flickering light. The relentless stranger had become a walking torch, yet he still walked with no hint of pain or injury. Amidst the firelight Jake though he say the red light appear again, beginning at the hands

but soon spreading around the whole of the body.

Now Nails was moving to intercept the stranger, but he moved hesitantly. As the man's clothing burned away smooth skin was revealed underneath, in some places marred by the imprints of bullets and Nails's attacks, in other featureless beneath the burning chemicals.

"Son of a *bitch*, what the hell are you?!" Nails screamed as he lunged forward to meet the creature once more. He rained blows upon the brute and weaved around its clumsy attempts to strike him back even as its halo of light glowed ever brighter and the fire lashed at the cold, empty air of the factory. Will thought he saw the answer to the mystery of the stalker's immobile hat, for as clothing burned it revealed more layers of cloth beneath, some even covering the neck and part of the head. The creature had been wrapped in layers of fabric stitched together to disguise the figure that was now being revealed by fire.

The thing being harrowed by Nails was fashioned after the rough form of a man. It was nearly bereft of details, smooth and uniform. Even its face was plain, a smooth mask of almost non-existent features that glistened under the last of the blaze.

It's a golem, Jake thought. Out in the world, acting on its own...

Again and again Nails hammered the glowing automaton with powerful blows. For every blow he landed that struck true, leaving hideous dents in the golem's form, two or three landed too short or glanced aside, deflected by the sturdy nature of the enchanted iron that was at once armor and the body it defended. Still, Nails did not let up, pummeling the golem without mercy, with only the briefest of pauses here and there to avoid a swinging radiant fist. The factory, empty and silent for so long, once again rang with the sounds of metal influenced by great force.

In the span of perhaps a minute, one of the longest of any of the Winds' lives, Nails had battered the golem into mangled wreckage, so marred and twisted it now more resembled an abstract sculpture of a man. After a final crushing blow from Nails that left his fist deeply impressed in its face the golem crashed to the floor with a resounding tone. With one misshapen arm it reached out toward Nails and began to pull itself toward him across the floor with the other. Nails realized with astonishment that even now, in its decrepit state, it was still trying to fight back.

With a grunt Nails stomped on the golem's head, mashing it into the concrete floor. At first he thought he had subdued the menace, but the nimbus around it quickly began to glow much brighter.

"Oh, come *on!*" Nails complained. "Run, people!"

He kicked the golem's remains as hard as he could and turned to follow the others, who were already sprinting back out of the building. The automaton was soon glowing so brightly that the empty factory seemed illuminated by a tainted sunset: then, just as Nails crossed the threshold behind the others, it detonated.

The Winds knew from the terribly dramatic light that some sort of explosion was coming, but they had no idea how powerful it would be. They needn't have worried. At the outside walls of the building they were already beyond the reach of the blast; outside they only saw and heard the explosion and felt a tremor under their feet.

The factory itself was not so fortunate. When Nails had kicked the golem it skidded across the floor a short distance before smacking into another support beam. When the "dying" golem released all of its energy at once, the resulting blast liquefied the support beam and shattered the ceiling above it, beginning a cascade that ended with a massive section of the roof collapsing in an enormous cloud of dust.

"Well, then," Jake coughed as he waved at the dust, "at least it's better than a structure fire."

"You folks get rolling. I'll make sure it's dead," said Nails.

"Good call," said Marc.

While the others ran for Cynthia's car, Nails hurried back into what was left of the factory. He scrambled over the ruins of the fallen roof and began to sift through the still-hot wreckage. Presently he found a portion of the golem's torso, mangled, melted and twisted, along with most of both shoulders and the upper half of one arm. The remains were still painfully hot: Nails juggled the thing back and forth as it cooled off.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Someone in one of the active factories must have heard or seen the

ruckus and called the police. Nails wondered idly what they would attribute this new disaster to as he rose into the heavens with his prize.

Cynthia drove the others back to their own vehicles and in short order the team was on its return trip to the Mansion. George, Sullivan and G.R. were waiting for them in the Foyer when they arrived.

“Check this guy out,” Nails laughed as he held up the massive, twisted remains of the golem. “Drinking contests and dynamite don’t mix, kids.”

The group went straight to the Lab, where Nails laid the husk upon the table. George and Jake gathered equipment to examine it in almost ceremonial fashion. Jake started taking meticulous measurements of the ruined homunculus, while George examined it with a magnifying glass.

“This is remarkable,” he thought aloud.

“I’ll say,” Nails chuckled. “The last statues that tried to kill us weren’t nearly so uppity.”

“It *is* a golem, right? I thought they were just big dumb walking statues, not glowing dreadnaughts of exploding doom,” said Jake. “The ones at the oil rig sure were.”

“Indeed.” George set down his magnifying glass and motioned for Nails to turn the ruins over. The golem’s back lacked the front’s ugly bullet and punch marks, but it still ran in creases and ripples from being partially melted.

George quickly resumed his examination. “Whomever produced this golem evidently has found a way to empower it beyond its normal limits. Fascinating.”

“‘Whomever’?” scoffed G.R. “Come on, we know it’s the dragon, right?”

“It would make sense. Golems were guarding one of the circles. Both would take a huge amount of power and mystical know-how to create,” said Jake.

“Those golems were of a markedly different style, Jake,” George pointed out. “This one is considerably larger, made of metal, and...”

He stopped abruptly and leaned closer to the area of the golem’s left shoulder blade. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” Jake asked, leaning closer himself. Framed in George’s magnifying glass was a series of shallow pictographs. Though they were distorted from the melting of the golem’s skin, they remained mostly legible.

“Whoa, are these what I think they are?” Jake asked.

“Evidently. They’re Yd glyphs,” replied George.

Will frowned. “Since when do the Yd make golems? None of the markings in the summoning chambers that we saw were Yd.”

“Any idea what they mean?” asked G.R.

George ran the tip of a finger along the rows of glyphs as he translated. “I’m am two of three, Inevitable Sunrise. First of the first born’s hand. One of legions.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” growled Marc.

“I have no idea,” George said. “Though ‘one of legions’ strikes me as rather foreboding.”

Jake laughed bitterly. “No kidding! Apparently there are at least three of these things.”

“Could this be some kind of escalation? A few summoning circles and some low-key monsters aren’t enough, so the dragon makes these tanks to actively hunt the streets?” asked Will.

George’s brow furrowed. “Perhaps. That hypothesis, however, contends with the fact that before all else, the golem destroyed a vampire.”

“It *did* try to kill me,” said Will.

“Before or after you pointed your weapons at it?” George asked.

“After...wait, are you suggesting this thing came after me because I *threatened* it?”

“We don’t have enough hard facts to make many suppositions yet,” said George. “I am only attempting to clarify what data we do have. This includes the facts that the golem, like yourselves, traversed populated streets in a relatively inconspicuous manner, passing up numerous opportunities to attack innocents for the chance to destroy the vampire. It did also attack Will, but only after being threatened with firearms, while it pursued you all single-mindedly only *after* being fired upon repeatedly.”

"I'm not convinced, George," Jake said. "Sure, the golem followed simple objectives. That's what golems do. They're like robots running simple programs. They have a limited intellect and can't think for themselves or handle complex tasks."

"Indeed. The question then becomes how the behaviors we have observed conform to whatever directives the golem was following," said George.

"How will we find the other two?" asked Will.

Jake chuckled glumly. "Good question. I suppose running around town looking for huge guys sewn into several layers of clothing it out."

"We'll need new tactics if we're going to fight more of these things," Nails said. "This one could easily have killed any of you."

"It had no trouble pulverizing that vampire," muttered Will.

"That's what I mean," Nails said. "When the thing hit me it was like being shot. With wrecking balls. Made out of lava."

"First thing's first," said George. "I will learn what I can from this specimen, then review recent news reports for signs of more. For the present, your field tactics will have to adapt. None of you should ever be more than half a block from any other. Your ordinance loads will also have to be adjusted."

"My dreams have come true," Jake said wistfully.

"Do you want me to take a look into this thing?" Cynthia asked. "I can find out right now where it came from and what it's for. It might help us prepare for fighting the others."

"I'm not certain that's a good idea," said George. "There's no telling what you will see within these remains, or if--"

"For crying out loud, George," Jake complained. "There's no need to make an issue about this. All she's gonna do is take a quick look and find out where we need to go to stop these things. What's the worst that can happen?"

For a bare second, George had the panicked look of a drowning man. Then his features calmed and he held up a hand as he leaned back in his chair. "Very well."

Aware that all eyes were once again upon her, Cynthia stepped forward and reached for the golem. She laid her hand upon it for only a moment before drawing away and staring at the floor, saying nothing.

"...well?" Jake finally asked after several moments of silence. "Where do we go?"

Cynthia raised her eyes to meet his.

"To war."