

Pab awoke, suddenly and quite accidentally. In that moment, his first of consciousness, he was not naïve or ignorant, for knowledge of himself and the world had been made a part of his nature by his creator. Thus in that instant he did not flinch or react to the probing touch that had disturbed him, yet he could freely observe his examiner while giving them no outward sign of his awareness.

He knew immediately the nature of the being that prodded him gingerly where he lay, spread on a straw mat on the floor of a deep closet. Her eyes were dead, yet aware and full of cunning: her cold, pale skin was slick with fresh blood. She examined him carefully, as though she thought he might lunge at her at any moment to destroy her. Indeed, Pab considered doing just that, but uncertainty stayed him. For a vampire to be in this sanctum some disaster must have transpired. The blood that soaked her ragged dress and dripped from her in a grotesque rain spoke of a massacre in this once inviolate place. Pab wrestled with the decision: to strike now and finish the creature, or continue to feign an inanimate nature until the vampire departed, then seek to discover what had transpired.

Presently the decision was made for him. The vampire drew away, apparently having taken him for a lifeless statue. She was half-correct.

Pab waited for a long time after she was gone to move. Desperate though he was to learn all that had happened, he knew that haste would reveal him. Discretion was his ally now.

When finally he could wait no longer, Pab rose from his resting place and stole through the manor. Though he took his first steps doing so, his walk was as steady as any pedestrian could desire: yet his footfalls sounded like deep drumbeats on the foundation, so by necessity his pace was agonizingly slow lest he give himself away.

Disaster greeted him soon enough. Like so much else, the mansion was something he had never seen, yet knew intimately. The floor plan was etched into his mind as surely as his own name and so he made his way confidently through the rooms. Hideous scenes met him in nearly every one. The various quarters of the servants had become charnel houses, strewn with mortal remains often mangled beyond recognition. Those not found left like refuse in their own beds Pab discovered strewn about the house. A gardener who looked to have been ravaged by wild beasts was slumped against a wall in the front hall: a young maid had been tortured to death with some diabolical sharp instrument and left lying upon the floor of the hall outside the library.

It was there, in the library, that Pab discovered the atrocity he had dreaded, yet knew he must inevitably find. Strewn upon the expensive rugs were the shattered and mangled remains of Pab's brothers, while in the back, near the fire, Pab saw the bodies of his fathers.

Pab walked solemnly to where they now rested, propped in the armchairs by the fireplace. Wise and gentle Nyrid's empty eyes gazed at nothing; twin trails of blood had dried on his neck in paths running from grotesque wounds under his jaw. Cunning and handsome Edmund's head lolled as though he dozed, but his features were still contorted with the agony he had died in. Morbidly, infuriatingly, the two men sat hand-in-hand, a last insult from the monster that undoubtedly thought it funny to so profane the dead.

Pab knew he should act quickly. Though it pained him to leave his fathers as they were, he also understood that moving them at all could give his presence away. He forced himself to turn away and seek something else in the room, the tome that described the creation of golems of all sorts. As he gathered it and a handful of other manuals of magic into his arms, Pab swore that he would use them to avenge his fathers' deaths. He sought out two other items before departing: a long cloak and a pouch of coins Edmond had kept hidden in the parlor.

Clutching the fortune in tender and the much greater fortune in magic to his chest, Pab fled the house of his father into the dark hours of the morning. From that moment on his every thought and deed would be inspired by the drive to carry on his father's legacy. He would begin anew, re-forge his family name and baptize it in the blood of the monsters that had ruined his forebears, however long it took. Pab knew he could weather the coming years, for like his brothers Tarmo and Temen, Pab had been made in the image of his name. It was a good Yd name, a warrior's name, signifying strength and endurance.

It meant "iron."

“Cynthia?”

Cynthia jumped at the sound of Jake’s voice. “Sorry. I kind of zoned out there for a minute.”

“Yeah, you’ve been doing that a lot lately,” Will muttered.

“Hey, give me a break!” Cynthia snapped. “I’m under a lot of pressure here, trying to sort everything out in my head so I can keep your ass from getting--”

“*Lady and gentlemen, please,*” George said. “*Remember your situation.*”

Will and Cynthia fell silent. The gravity of the situation had not left their minds at all: it was in fact a large cause of the tension the team was feeling. The Winds exchanged wordless glances and resumed watching their destination: an ancient and ruined grating covering the entrance to a long-disused sewer tunnel.

Two hours earlier the team had gathered in the Situation Room and listened to Cynthia give the details she could of the upcoming scenario. She told them the story of an ancient artificer named Edmond, a nobleman and dilettante who had conceived a plan to rid Ylelon of the evils that plagued it. With the aid of his companion, Nyrid, Edmond had intended to construct an army of golems. The tireless, fearless warriors would sweep through the land, crushing the creatures of the night beneath their marching feet.

As grand as this vision was, Edmond lost sight of his goals. He began to hold the destruction of evil as more important than protecting the innocent and so he and Nyrid grew apart. Edmond withdrew into himself over time and forgot his dreams of the relentless guardians, instead losing himself in a vicarious mind-link with the golems he had already created, Ember and Magma.

Cynthia explained this to the others as well as she could. The details after that began to get fuzzy.

She knew that before abandoning his dream, Edmond had created a third golem. Unlike the first two (and golems in general), this one was made to be fully self-aware and intelligent. This “son” of Edmond was intended to be a helpmeet for him, assisting him in his work of creating the imagined army of golems. This new golem was named Pab and was given a remarkable ability by his father: in addition to being sentient, he could use magic.

Edmond never activated Pab. Cynthia didn’t know why, which frustrated her to no end, as it might have also explained what was wrong with the golem. The object that Cynthia had obtained most of this information from, the “imprint,” had been created by Pab as a means of reproducing his own intellect and personality, which was itself a copy of Edmond’s--and probably a flawed one, at that.

The problem was that there was something very wrong with Pab. Cynthia didn’t know if Edmond had left the golem incomplete, or had made a mistake in the “copying” process, but Pab’s “mind” was somehow incomplete, fractured. When Cynthia had learned Edmond and Pab’s story from the imprint, those memories of Edmond had come through clear and detailed, passing undistorted through the filter of Pab’s mind. Those thoughts and memories of the golem, however, were fuzzy and faint. Cynthia had no idea what this might mean. Even George was unsure of what it indicated, beyond a very frightening supposition: in addition to being quite powerful, Pab was very possibly insane--or whatever passed for it with a golem.

“So, what do we do? Is this really the only entrance?” Will asked.

Cynthia nodded. “The last one that’s left. Pab moved into these tunnel ages ago. He set up his workspaces, then had his golems block off the surrounding passages so there was only one way in or out.”

“If this is the only way out, why don’t we just collapse it and trap them all inside?” Marc asked.

Jake raised his eyebrows. “Did Marc just have a good idea?”

“I know,” Will said. “I’m scared too.”

“That’s no good. Trapping them would only hold them until they could dig themselves out again,” Cynthia said.

“What are we supposed to do, realistically?” Jake asked. “We can’t fight them if there are as many as you say and now, you tell us we can’t trap them, either.”

“It’s Pab. He’s the key,” the psychic replied. “He’s the brains controlling everything that’s going on. Take him out and his whole army is just a bunch of blank slates waiting for orders no one can give.”

“So we just sneak through the subterranean laid filled with nigh-invincible automatons to defeat

their super-golem creator. No problem,” Jake said.

“I’m taking notes for the next role-playing session,” laughed G.R.

“Let me go in first,” Nails offered. “I can scout ahead and run for the door if I have to.”

Cynthia shook her head. “You’ll get lost in there without me. It’s a maze of old tunnels that haven’t been used or maintained for hundreds of years. That’s why Pab is using them”

“Oh, *good*. A problem that resists solving. Just in time to keep our lives from getting boring,” muttered Jake.

“You’re not helping, Jake,” said Cynthia.

“He kind of has a point,” Will said. “We’re supposed to stop this invincible army but you shoot down every idea we come up with.”

Cynthia looked steadily at Will for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“This is only the beginning,” she said. “Pab has been building his power base for years. When his army is strong enough, he’ll send it out into the city openly. They’ll overrun the whole country and kill everything that gets in their way, including innocent people. To follow his father’s dream to free Ylelon of its monsters, Pab will order his golems to carve the stone and the metal out of the land and turn it into more of themselves. Every living thing in this country will live in fear of the heartless warriors until the end of time.

“That’s why we’re here. That’s why we have got to find a way to win.”

“Ok, enough. Let’s do this already,” Nails said. “Hopeless odds or not, we’re not going to accomplish anything standing around out here.”

“Can you guide us in there and warn us if anything is coming?” Will asked Cynthia. She nodded.

“All right, Nails up front, Jake in back. Lights, motion trackers and, um, Cynthia-senses?”

“Cynses,” suggested Jake. “Spelled with a CY.”

“Aw, man. I shoulda thought of that,” G.R. said.

“Move up,” commanded Will.

The entryway to the sewers was located in a shallow culvert at the base of one of the old city’s large hills. Atop the hill was the angular silhouette of an antique church, while all about were the husks of brick and adobe buildings left over from previous eras. The Winds were standing in one of the oldest surviving sections of a very old city, a fact which Will both knew was certainly deliberate and found very disconcerting.

The Winds crept to the culvert, watching all around them for signs of possible adversaries or civilians. When they were satisfied that all was clear they followed Cynthia single-file into the darkness beyond the broken bars of the tunnel grating.

If the darkness outside in a district that long predated design to take advantage of city lights was pronounced, within the tunnel it was total. The team’s lights carved narrow shafts in the unrelenting darkness, playing across the ancient bricks of the circular passageway. It was not long before the tunnel ended in a junction of three larger, square corridors.

Modern sewer systems in most cities are rarely more than narrow pipes to channel waste and water. This was not the case with the antique sewers of Ylelon. Like most such constructs in older cities, the tunnels here were much larger than in modern ones, both to allow for overflow from heavy rains and to accommodate cleaning crews. Narrow walkways ran alongside the walls, bordering the wide and deep troughs meant for water, now long since dry. Centuries of development in Ylelon had seen most of the entryways to the network covered or forgotten. The lost tunnels had become one of the city’s innumerable urban legends, varying from telling to telling in size, depth, location, ominous history and so on. In particular the tales were explicit in detailing the supposed inhabitants of the tunnels. Alligators, serial killers and hideously deformed vagrants all allegedly populated the sewers in vast numbers, emerging only to terrorize Ylelon’s citizens long enough to inspire sordid new stories.

*If people only knew*, Jake thought wryly.

Cynthia led the team strait on through the first intersection, again through a second, then right at a third. It did not take long for the others to lose all sense of position in the myriad of turns. With increasing frequency they passed regions of wall and whole sections of tunnel that had collapsed.

“I see what you mean about getting lost down here,” said Nails. “Are you following some kind of psychic trail to where we need to go?”

Cynthia turned her flashlight beam off of the ledge and onto the thick dust in the waterway, where the prints of many feet had made a narrow trail. “Mostly, I’m following that.”

“I could have done that,” Nails muttered.

“Probably,” Cynthia said absently. “But you couldn’t do this.”

She led the team around a corner of the next intersection and motioned for them to press up against the wall, then clicked off her light. Without a word among them the team did the same. They waited in the quiet of the impenetrable darkness long enough to all begin wondering what was happening. Then they felt it: the steady beat of impact tremors, feet marching in perfect unison, approaching down the tunnel the Winds were now hiding around the corner from. Seconds crawled by, marked by the metronome shudders in the floor that were soon accompanied by the sound of heavy iron feet tromping on brick. The footsteps came ever closer until the walls were trembling and the sound filled the air. The team could feel the golems now, only a few feet away in the inky black, walking through the very intersection they had been in moments before. They drew menacingly near, so close that Jake was certain the team would be discovered. Then the golems turned, one by one, marching away down the tunnel with their backs to the Winds.

Silence crept into place behind the retreating footfalls of the golems. Jake abruptly realized that part of the quiet was that he was holding his breath. He slowly began to breathe again as he listened to the receding echoes of the squad’s marching.

Even after the last reverberation had faded Cynthia waited for several moments before turning her light on again.

“Ho-lee *crap*,” said Nails.

“See what I mean?” said Cynthia. “There were eight of them in that group.”

“*Eight?*” Jake blurted, then held one gauntlet over his face shield as he realized how loud he had been.

“Should we go after them?” asked Will.

“No need. If we do what we’re here for, they’ll either be coming back or not need taking care of,” Cynthia replied.

“Ok, that’s it. I’m putting a ban on you saying anything else ominous or unsettling,” said Jake.

The journey continued, going so deep underground through so many twists and turns that everyone but Cynthia lost all sense of distance and direction. This realization was still sinking in when it was joined by a new one: the walls and floors were vibrating again. This was the same drumbeat rhythm as before, but deeper. More of it.

“Shouldn’t we be stopping?” Will asked as Cynthia pressed forward despite the increasing strength of the tremors.

“It’s not another squad,” Cynthia said. “We’re almost there.”

She wasn’t kidding. Barely a minute later the team came to a wall made of patched-together sheets of metal at the end of the tunnel. A low arched doorway was set in the middle of the wall and a pale blue light was shining through it.

Cynthia made a slashing motion across her neck and turned her light off again. The rest of the team followed suit, trailed after Cynthia through the archway and were struck speechless.

The brick floor of the old tunnel ran intact only a few feet beyond the arch before ending abruptly where the ground fell away as the edge of a shallow pit. The walls, ceiling, and floors had all been dug away, leaving an immense cavern of two shallow hemispheres. All through the space golems were moving and working, at least three dozen of them by Jake’s count. The vibrations the team had been feeling were the product of roughly a third of the golems working in perfect unison, hammering their fists against red-hot lumps of metal laid before them on massive anvils. In that tempo, the exact beat as when the golems walked, they struck the glowing masses, blow by blow, into the rough shapes of men. The other golems busied about various other tasks: steadying the iron as it was shaped, working enormous

bellows on Hogan-shaped furnaces by the anvils or feeding armloads of scrap and fuel into them. On the far edge of the cavern two golems battered a single block of stone, eerily mirroring each other's movements perfectly as they, too, fashioned a humanoid shape from raw material.

Yet, all of this was not the most astonishing sight in the chamber. In the center of the floor, where it was level, a huge globe of pale blue light hovered over a roughly round pile of scrap with a flat top, like a plateau. The light from the globe was a pall over the strange scene, mixing here and there with the angry red glow of the furnaces.

"Tell me I'm not seeing this," Will whispered. "Tell me I'm just having a terrible dream."

"We're in full view of these things," Jake said with urgency.

"It doesn't matter," said Cynthia. "These golems are set to a task: making more golems. As long as we don't interfere they won't even notice us."

"That's not comforting," said Jake.

"What do we do?" Nails asked.

"Let's set all the explosives we've got and turn the place into a glass pit," growled Marc.

"Seconded," said Jake.

"Vetoed!" said George, Will, and Nails.

"Aw," said G.R.

"We need to find Pab," Cynthia droned. "If we bury this place the golems that survive will dig themselves out. If we take Pab down, these guys will just be a bunch of brainless statues."

"Oh, so it's easy, then," said Jake.

"Any idea where Pab is?" Will asked.

Cynthia pointed at another archway on the far side of the chamber. "His living space is through there."

"Living space? He's a golem," Jake said.

"He's a golem with delusions of fine taste," corrected Cynthia. "Follow me."

She led the team around the perimeter of the room, as far from the golems as possible. That still meant walking in plain view of the working constructs. Once, the Winds passed within twenty feet of one of the anvils, so close that their ears rang from the peal of iron on iron. One of the golems suddenly stopped its hammering and turned toward the group. In a flash Jake was braced in a wide stance, his armor's guns swinging into place over his shoulders, the pods of tiny missiles mounted atop the gun tubes hissing in readiness to fire.

The golem continued to turn, walked around to another side of the anvil and resumed hammering a different portion of the nascent form.

"Sorry," Jake said after several seconds, but left his weapons in a ready state.

The archway led back into intact sewers. These were the same basic layout and materials as the previous tunnels, but there the similarities ended. Here, the walls were enhanced by candle sconces set at regular intervals, the walkways lined with strips of thick rug. The surfaces here were spotlessly clean, devoid of the centuries of grime in the outlying passages. There was no rubble from caved-in walls or ceilings to be seen. Some of the side passages had been closed off with the same walls of patchwork metal sheets, most of them with crude doors hanging partially open. As strange as it all was, Will had to admit that a lot of effort had gone into making the place almost homey.

"Hold tight," Cynthia said as she laid a hand on a nearby wall, "I have to see if I can find Pab now."

"Great," muttered Marc.

"It's no good. The sense of him is everywhere," Cynthia said after several moments.

"What the hell *is* this place?" asked Jake.

Cynthia shrugged. "It's Pab's home."

"How do we find him?" Nails asked.

"The old-fashioned way," Will said as he checked his guns. "Keep moving."

"Ok, but everyone kill your lights but me. If Pab sees us he'll bring every golem in the place down on us," said Cynthia.

Now in almost total darkness with only the slender beam of Cynthia's light before them, the team moved on again. Each of them decided internally whether to be dismayed or relieved when they came upon one of the walled-off passageways with soft light pouring through the open doorway. Cynthia turned off her flashlight and peered through the door, then signaled the others to follow her.

The space beyond was another stretch of tunnel, but this one was cordoned off at both ends. All of it was appointed so well that it actually resembled a nice room more than a section of abandoned storm drain. Decorative throw rugs were spaced atop the carpet, while low bookcases and comfortable-looking couches lined the walls. At the far end was, of all things, an actual fireplace pieced together with bricks and flagstones from the tunnel. It was a roaring blaze in the fireplace that lit the room. Two massive armchairs stood one on each side of the fire with their backs to the door. Visible on an armrest of one of the chairs was a hand that glinted in the firelight.

Cynthia glanced back over her shoulder to make sure the others had seen what she had. Will nodded to her, then gave the signal to fan out.

The team members spread apart and began to move toward the seated figure as quietly as possible. Jake lagged behind the line the others formed lest the sounds of his armor give him away. Nails picked up a couch and carried it ready to strike with like a club.

Inch by inch the Winds drew closer to their target, weapons at the ready. They came so close that Cynthia could see marks on Pab's arm, scars in the iron from the tools that had shaped him so long ago.

Will held up a hand to signal the team to be ready to attack in tandem and at that moment an alarm went off in Cynthia's head. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Pab spoke first.

"I was wondering when you would turn up."

His voice was deep and clear, but hollow, inorganic, words driven through the empty space of a body animate without life and spoken with an lofty, archaic accent.

Quickly, he rose and turned to face the Winds. Pab was smaller than the servants he had made so many of, in fact slightly smaller than an average man. The whole of his iron skin was blemished by tool marks, the only details on a body that was nothing more than the silhouette of a man rendered in metal. Even his face was plain, less defined than a mannequin's, his mouth the only visible and functioning detail, producing that unnatural voice.

"I should welcome you to my home," he boomed.

The alarm in Cynthia's head became a screaming siren. "Hit him now!" she screamed, "It's a trap!"

Patches of air all around Pab and the Winds shimmered as golems materialized out of the ether, twelve of them altogether, completely surrounding the group. They brandished huge swords, colossal hammers, gigantic axes; they were wreathed in flames, in crackling electricity, in bright energy. All but two of them were of the metal design the Winds had seen until now. The two exceptions were hulking brutes of rough stone that glowed with internal heat, one of each standing on either side of Pab.

"Bet setting bombs and blowing the place to hell sounds pretty good about now, huh?" Marc growled.

"Now, now, none of that," Pab said. He took three steps closer to the team. They grouped closer together and trained their weapons on Pab's head, which the other golems responded to by moving closer.

"Do please put the weapons down. You'd only embarrass yourselves," Pab said.

Reluctantly the team lowered their arms. Jake had his guns settle back into the storage position, while Nails defiantly dropped the couch at his own feet.

"That's better," Pab said. He began to pace back and forth in front of Will. "I hope you'll forgive me my curiosity, but as you are uninvited guests I feel I am entitled to ask: did you really think you could come freely into my home and challenge me this way?"

"Well, yeah. Kinda," said Jake.

Pab tilted his head, apparently regarding Jake. "You have been harrowing my forces for weeks. Why would you do this?"

"Are you seriously asking us that question right now?" Nails blurted.

"We can start with the fact that your 'forces' have tried to kill several innocent people, including

Will,” Jake said coldly. “And those are just the ones we knew about.”

“You don’t understand,” Pab said. He sounded disappointed, almost sad. “No one understands.”

“Understands *what?*” snarled Marc. Nails’s eyes flickered to his friend’s shotgun, ready to slap it down if the man did anything foolish.

“Understands,” Pab said, “that I am trying to save this land. To purge it of evil. My father--”

“We know about your father,” Cynthia said, with much more edge in her voice than usual.

Pab abruptly stopped his pacing. “Do you?”

“That’s right. He made golems, too.” Cynthia’s gaze was steady, locked on Pab’s featureless face.

“Indeed!” Pab said with his arms held out in a gesture of admiration. “He was a visionary, an idealist, a great man.”

“He was a lunatic and a feeble degenerate!” said Cynthia.

Pab leaned threateningly close to Cynthia’s face. “Were you not a woman, I would strike you for speaking so.”

“Don’t let that stop you! Edmund lost his conviction. He reached the point that he was hurting more people than he helped. Tell me I’m wrong!”

Pad remained menacingly close to Cynthia, but said nothing.

“Our teacher likes to quote a certain philosopher,” continued Cynthia. “‘A fanatic is someone who redoubles his efforts while forgetting his goals.’ That’s what happened to Edmund, isn’t it? His creations were causing more problems than they solved.” She pointed to the stone golems still standing silently behind Pab. “They looked just like those two.”

“Yes,” Pab said, straightening and walking toward his bodyguards. “I remade my brothers Tarmo and Temen to honor my fathers. They helped me build this place, gather resources, bide my time. Now they will help me complete my task.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” scoffed Jake. “So far all we’ve seen you do is take out a few random monsters. That’s nothing we can’t do and we usually manage to do it without attacking innocent children!”

“I assume you are referring to the family of wolves you prevented me from executing?” Pab said.

“‘Executing’?” shouted Nails. “You sent your killing machines after *little kids!*”

“Sacrificial lambs for the good of the whole, I assure you,” said Pab. “My father knew what it would take to make Ylelon whole again. It requires benediction, courage, sacrifice--”

“Your father lost his mind,” Cynthia spat. “Edmund went crazy. He stopped caring and started hurting the people he was supposed to be protecting. That’s why Nyrid left him and why he never woke you up--”

“Enough!” Pab stomped and the floor beneath his foot shifted amidst the sound of cracking brick. His golems moved one step closer to the team again, dangerously close.

Pab straightened as he composed himself. “I don’t know how you’ve hidden the wolves from me, but my auguries will find them in time. I would have found you as well, but you were kind enough to save me the trouble of looking. Once you have been executed I will raise my army and finish my father’s work.”

“Oh, enough of this!” Nails shouted as he kicked the couch, which flipped end-over-end and landed over Pab. Nails was already moving, dashing between the two golems in the rearmost position behind the team and striking them each once with all his might, sending them both toppling over.

“Go!” Nails said, already rushing back toward Pab, who had just flung the couch off of himself. Nails swung at Pab’s head with a crushing roundhouse that impacted on empty air. A ripple of energy shimmered along the outline of a dome surrounding Pab and disappeared.

“Oh, come on! Does *everyone* know that trick?” complained Nails.

By now the rest of the team was sprinting for the door and away from the half of Pab’s golems that were pursuing them. Jake was not the least bit surprised when the door slammed shut of its own accord. Not surprised in this case, meaning prepared. Jake fired two of his missiles without breaking stride. The closed door became several loosely-connected chunks of red-hot metal, which Jake plowed through at a dead run.

“Hell yeah!” he shouted triumphantly. “Improvised explosives use #38: emergency lock pick!”

“Can you get us out of here?” Will asked Cynthia.

“This way.”

“What about Pab?” Jake asked as the team retreated the way they had come.

“We weren’t ready,” said Will. “Pab is prepared for us somehow and we can’t risk getting cornered on his turf.”

“What about Nails?” huffed Marc.

“I’ll catch up!” Nails said into his Jakecam™. The golems closed in around him, swinging weapons, trying to take hold of him, but none of them made contact. Nails was a blur, pouring his rage at the things Pab had done into every punch that left a mark in metal, every kick that sent a soulless engine of death crashing to the floor.

“Is that the best you can do?” he taunted.

“No,” Pab said as he snapped his fingers, making an ominous gonging sound. The blaze in the fireplace drew down into embers in an instant and was gone at the same time the various powers of many of the golems diminished to nothing, leaving the chamber utterly dark.

“Oh, shi-” Nails was cut off as a metal fist hammered him in the mouth. Pain ripped through him as other fists and weapons struck him from all sides.

“Did you really think me so helpless in my own home?” Pab’s voice resonated in the dark as Nails felt long chords of material fall over him; a net, pinning him down while the golems tried to beat him into submission. Cold hands seized him by his wrists and ankles.

“Bring him,” Nails heard Pab say over the thuds of his own body being pummeled, “and capture the others.”

*“Nails is down,”* George said somberly.

“What happened?” asked Will.

*“Pab blinded him and he was overwhelmed. You have to be extremely careful. Pab is more cunning than we anticipated.”*

“Can we get out through the forging area with Pab knowing we’re here?” Jake puffed through his shortening breath.

“No choice, it’s the only way out,” said Cynthia. “Besides, we don’t know for sure--”

The team turned the last corner before the hall leading to the forge and found the golems from that room arrayed before them in perfect rank and file.

“--if Pab can make the forge golems stop us,” Cynthia finished.

In perfect unison the squad of golems began to move toward the team.

“Heads down!” Jake shouted and unleashed a volley of his Travel-Size Surface-to-Anything Missiles™. Explosions burst in the faces of several of the lead-row golems, but they marched on undeterred even though some of them now had missing faces and gaping wounds in their bodies.

“Back the way we came,” Will said as he fired solid slugs at the approaching constructs. “We need to free Nails.”

“Get going, I’ll cover our backs!” shouted Jake.

The rest of the team turned to run again as Jake laid down suppressing fire. One golem was reduced to slag and a second severely disfigured before Jake ran out of missiles, whereupon he switched to plasma. Another more golem was reduced to amorphous lumps of red-hot iron before the power reserves for the plasma ran empty. Still determined, Jake emptied his machinegun ammo stores. The multitude of high-caliber rounds, hundreds and hundreds of them, dug ugly scars and tore grooves in several more golems’ bodies, tearing them into scrap through sheer force and attrition, but when the guns clicked empty there were still many automatons coming.

“Aw, fiddlesticks,” Jake grumbled as he powered down his weapons and ran.

“Any word on Nails?” Will asked as Cynthia led him and Marc back toward Pab’s chamber.

*"His camera is offline,"* George said.

*"Damn it, I'm going to stop making new ones for him!"* Jake said. *"I'm on my way back to you guys, I just ran out of ammo."*

"Dude...can that happen?" Marc asked.

"Cynthia, could you fight the golems enough to free Nails?" asked Will.

"Probably not," she whispered.

*"I told you we should have upgraded to canister rifles,"* said Jake.

"Cynthia, can you maybe, hijack Pab's mind or something...?" Will trailed off as Cynthia came to a stop. Heavy footsteps could be felt in the floor.

"Any ideas?" Marc rumbled just as Jake caught up to the group.

"This way," Cynthia said. She led them down a side passage that dead-ended in one of the patchwork metal walls after a hundred feet.

"What the hell? This isn't a way out!" growled Marc.

"No," replied Cynthia, "but it's a place we can make a final stand."

"Jake? Marc?" Will said.

Jake opened his armor's wrist panel and began to type while Marc rooted through his duffle bag, pulling out explosives, weapons and ammunition in time with the sounds of Jake's armor powering up. Marc passed out extra ammunition and the team lined up along the walls, listening to the drumbeat footsteps coming closer.

Presently lights became visible at the far end of the hall: two sets of three trapezoids arranged in semblance of faces, the two stone golems leading a platoon of iron ones.

"Rain the hate!" Marc shouted. The team's shotguns roared and solid slugs hurled into the approaching homunculi. Hunks of rock were blasted free and smooth metal skin marred, but the golems came on as inexorably as ever. Cynthia flung a handful of grenades telekinetically behind the approaching ranks. The explosion sounded like a volcano erupting in the tunnels as the flash threw long shadows over the Lonely Winds. Still, the golems came. The one that looked like it was made of cooling magma raised its hammer and stepped ahead of the others.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Jake said as he ran forward to grab the hammer in mid-stroke. The golem hauled the weapon hard to the left, nearly dragging Jake off his feet, then to the right, slamming him against the wall.

"Jake!" Cynthia cried as the magma golem raised its hammer above its head. The massive hammerhead swung down and impacted on nothing, well above Jake.

"Nice save, Legs!" Marc laughed.

"Thanks, it'saaaaAAAIIEE!" Cynthia shrieked as a ring of fire sprang up from nothing, surrounding her as it burned freely on the bare brick floor.

"Cynthia!" cried Will. The other stone golem was marching toward her, glowing red hot. Will shot it twice in the face, then started forward, but was stopped when Marc clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"We gotta fall back!" the big man growled.

"We can't leave them!" Will shouted over more firing. Several of the golems were encircling a groggy Jake. Cynthia was almost completely concealed by the flames that surrounded her.

"Fall back!" Marc shouted as he all but dragged Will to the metal barricade. They slipped around the open door and threw themselves against the far side, trying to push it closed. Inch by inch it moved on squealing hinges. Will risked a glance around the side and saw the magma golem coming toward them faster than he'd ever seen a golem move, drawing its hammer back for a swing. With all their might Will and Marc forced the door closed just as Magma struck it. They were thrown off their feet by the door, stunned, left in the dark with massive shapes looming over them, silhouetted in the firelight leaking through the open doorway.

As Marc began to regain consciousness his first thought, based on the bone-splitting headache he had, was that he was the proud owner of a champion hangover. Then vague memories of a towering shape battering him with iron fists drifted through his mind and Marc assumed they were the result of a bar

fight. Finally, he realized he was being dragged by his wrist through the layers of dust atop a brick floor and previous events began to return to him.

Despite the ache in his skull Marc managed to lift his head and look around. All around him golems marched, one of them dragging Will by one leg. Two more were leading a struggling Jake with both hands clamped around his wrists, while a third dragged Cynthia by a handful of her hair.

Instinctively, Marc reached for his duffle bag, only to find it gone. He was completely unarmed and the others appeared to be as well. Try as he might, Marc could see no sign of Nails.

It was not long before the golems reached the forging area. They brought the team to the base of the scrap pile beneath the enormous light and dropped them there like so much refuse. As Marc struggled to his feet the golems formed a circle around the team, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in an impenetrable wall. Many of the other golems had returned to work in the forge, hammering away at new forms as though nothing had happened.

"I would stay down, if I were you." Pab's voice resonated unnaturally even in the open space of the forge. He was standing beside the scrap pile, looking up at the light.

"Come down here and say that!" demanded Marc.

"If you'd like another round with my forces, feel at liberty," Pab said. "I can direct them not to be gentle this time."

Marc held his ground, nearly vibrating with anger. Jake fidgeted constantly, fighting the temptation to power up his armor again.

Over the course of the next forty minutes Will and Cynthia regained consciousness. When Cynthia was finally fully awake Will helped her to stand. Pab's golems suddenly rearranged themselves into a straight line behind the team.

"Now that you are all present," boomed Pab, "we can begin."

Eight golems appeared at the inner tunnel's edge, marching into the light of the forge. Nails was held spread-eagle between them, still struggling to free himself and uttering a steady stream of colorful threats and curses.

"Nails!" Will called.

"Oh, hi, guys!" said Nails. "Sorry I couldn't come to the rescue, I was involved in a nasty pileup."

"Yeah, we had some problems ourselves," grumbled Jake.

"You don't say."

The golems brought Nails to the base of the scrap pile and forced him into a kneeling position. The workers in the room abruptly ceased their hammering and carried their newly-finished statues to the base of the scrapheap, where they arranged them equidistant around it, facing inward.

"I wanted you to see this, before your execution," Pab said.

"It would be a bit hard to see it afterward," quipped Jake. Will cracked a smile in spite of himself.

Pab swept a hand out dramatically, indicating the inert forms arrayed before him. "Now you will see how I replace what few losses you have cost me. With you gone, I will renew my father's mission to purge Ylelon of wickedness."

As if on cue, the workers returned to their stations and resumed their chores, drawing fresh globs of glowing-red iron from the furnaces and beginning a new tempo of synchronized blows.

"Just tell me one thing," Jake shouted above the din in the forge.

Pab turned his eyeless face toward Jake. "Yes?"

"Why did you wait until now to start doing anything?"

Pab said nothing.

"No, really. We've been 'purging' for a while now," Jake said. "Years, actually. If you've been around for so long, why did you just recently decide to send your little tin soldiers out in public? Or have your toys been wandering around for a while and we've just never noticed them?"

Pab stormed down off of the scrapheap and loomed over Jake. Marc and Will both tried to intervene but were stopped when the golems behind them seized their arms and held them immobile.

"I have spent the ages gathering my power. My plan was not to reveal myself too soon, but

circumstances have made it necessary.

“You mock my father’s memory, but I am not so proud as to think he was without his flaws. He lacked vision. But I do not.”

Pab turned and ascended the scrapheap again, climbing until he was almost standing in the hovering light. “I have watched the auguries, seen the signs. There is no more time to prepare. The End is here.”

Jake blanched. “Did he just say...?”

“Yeah, he did,” said Will. “We already stopped the End. They were a handful of obscure undead in a hole in the ground!”

“Oh, the End is much more than that,” Pab said, looking back over his shoulder at the team members as they exchanged glances among themselves. “The End has many agents, many servants.”

“Oh, yeah?” Just what is this “End,” then?” scoffed Nails.

“Death. Ruination. Destruction. It doesn’t matter,” said Pab. “It has been a source of much of Ylelon’s evil since long before even my time.”

“I got new for ya, pal,” shouted Marc. “You’re not doing the place any favors, either!”

“I will be the savior of this land!” Pab screamed. “It will be my strength that carries Ylelon from the darkness that has enshrouded it for so long!”

The golems holding Nails brought him forward, ahead of the group. There they forced him to his knees again and pulled his head down as a golem carrying a huge ax marched toward him.

“You can’t do this!” cried Will. The golem holding him shook him so violently his vision blurred.

“I am my father’s rightful heir!” Pab was raving, heedless of Nails’s frantic struggles and the team’s panicked shouting. “I am the living embodiment of a great dream!”

The light orb pulsed with energy, emitting an ear-splitting sound, deep and vibrato, that made the chamber shake in time with the tireless pounding of the workers and Pab’s hysterical shouts:

“I am the will of the land! The might of its people! I AM IRON MA--”

“Nyrid would be ashamed of you!” Cynthia screamed. Pab stopped in mid-word and stared at Cynthia while the light behind him grew noticeably brighter. The executioner golem held stock still, its ax positioned high in the air aligned with Nails’s neck.

“*You’re* why he left Edmund! Your father’s precious plan to save Ylelon only made another monster, one that spread like a virus!”

“*Enough!*” Pab roared. The light behind him pulsed again, rocking the chamber as the man of iron stormed down his scrapheap, barely stopping in time to avoid trampling Cynthia. He grasped her by the throat and pulled her to him. “I’ll crush you, harridan!”

Cynthia gasped through Pab’s chokehold, “Are you sure you shouldn’t be minding your spell instead?”

Pab dropped the psychic and spun on his heels to look up at the hovering light, which had begun to pulsate in a much more rapid pattern that shook the ceiling with its deep, metallic tones.

Once again Pab ran up the scrap pile to the light and stopped just before reaching it with his arms held wide.

“Let’s go!” Cynthia shouted as she ran around the line of golems and headed for the exit. For a moment the others stared at her, completely perplexed as to what has happened.

*Pab’s concentration is blown,* Cynthia broadcast into their minds, *Let’s get the hell out of here!*

Will pulled free of the golem holding him, which stayed in its exact position like a respectable statue. “Let’s go, Nails!” he called.

Nails wrenched free of his suddenly-immobile captors. “Excuse me!” he said as he hit the executioner golem dead in the face while running past it, knocking it prone.

“What the hell is going on here?” Jake asked as the team ran pell-mell for the tunnel.

“I broke Pab’s focus,” replied Cynthia. “That big light is pure magic drawn from the land. Pab was ready to dump into the new golems, so I distracted him when it was out of containment and unstable. He’s going to have to manage it in a hurry so it doesn’t blow up in his face.”

Nails scooted to a halt. “No kiddin’?” He turned and ran back toward Pab.

“No, don’t!” Cynthia yelled after him.

“Keep going!” urged Will.

When the team reached the tunnel their only light was from the dual lamps mounted on Jake’s helmet. Cynthia let Jake take the lead and shouted directions as the team followed his lights.

“Is anyone’s camera working?” asked Will.

“Mine’s gone.”

“Mine is, too.”

“Mine’s smashed.”

Over the sounds of the team running, Cynthia thought she heard Will using some very un-Will-like language.

Nails swept past the executioner golem again, tearing the ax free of its grasp as he went. With a furious cry he swung the weapon down at Pab. The thick, heavy blade bit several inches into the golem’s shoulder and lodged there.

“Do not distract me, fool!” Pab grated, “I must master the power before it destroys us!”

Nails turned and left at a relaxed walk. A moment later he returned carrying one of the inert statues like a club.

“Tag!” he said and swung. The impact flung Pab in an arc off of the scrapheap and into one of the kilns.

“Seeya,” Nails said as he laid the statue back across his shoulder. He was halfway to the exit again when he heard Pab running up behind him. Nails sprinted ahead to the tunnel door, slipped around the side and swung his golem-club as hard as he could the instant Pab came through. Metal heads clanged together and Pab’s feet whipped out ahead of him as he slammed down onto his back.

“How’s it feel?” Nails yelled as he battered Pab with the statue. “How’s it feel to be executed?”

Pab suddenly grabbed the statue just after it had struck him and used it to haul himself to his feet. “Do you have any idea what I’m going to do to you and your cohorts for this?”

“I don’t know about ‘cohorts,’” Nails said, “but for me, I’m guessing you’re going to shield me from the brunt of the explosion.”

Nails shoved the one statue into the other statue, pushing them both back through the doorway just as the hovering light detonated. The overpower flung Pab back through the door and leveled the wall.

“Holy *shit!*” Jake exclaimed as he and the others picked themselves up. They all were covered in dust that had been blown through the tunnels by a sudden gale.

“What the hell *was* that?” Marc sputtered, spitting out mouthfuls of dust.

“Pab’s magic went critical,” said Cynthia. “That was actually bigger than we thought it would be.”

“‘We’?” Will asked.

“Pab’s knowledge, my brain.”

“Ah.”

“Nails! You ok, man?” Jake called into the huge dust clouds floating through the tunnels. There was no answer.

“We gotta go get ‘im!” blurted Marc.

“It is safe?” Will asked.

Cynthia nodded.

The team made their way back toward the forge. Jake’s light played across the drifting clouds of dust, creating ghosts that reached for the Winds only to vanish into nothing. Here and there bricks had fallen free of the ceiling and now lay half-concealed in small piles of dust and sand falling through the new gaps above.

Presently a huge mound of debris loomed before the team. They trod upon it and found it to be a thick layer of warm dirt atop hunks of metal. Scraping and tapping sounds were coming from deep within the mound, near where the door had been.

“Oh, crap,” Jake said and began to dig. As he pulled away great heaps of dirt the tapping became a

pounding.

“Nails?” Jake asked as he lifted a steaming-hot plate of metal and tossed it aside, “can you hear me?”

A metal fist burst through the detritus. Jake skipped backward as Pab forced his way up through the wreckage. The golem was misshapen, half-melted and battered by the falling wall. Pab made inarticulate, threatening sounds as he raised both hands, which now glowed with eerie eldritch green light, and pointed them at the team.

“Get down!” Will shouted.

A sound like an echoing shout came through Pab’s distorted mouth just as he toppled backward into the dirt. Nails stood up from beneath him, gripping the clasped feet of the inactivated golem and looking like he had been caught in a trash compactor. That was on fire.

“Remind me to avoid large explosions from now on. It’s just not worth the cool factor,” he said dryly, hefted the statue and began to bludgeon Pab mercilessly. After a few moments he tossed the mangled weapon aside and stood cross-armed over Pab, who had been mashed down into the rubble beneath him.

“Any last words?” Marc chuckled.

Cynthia moved to Pab’s side. Will and Nails moved as if to stop her but she held up a hand. She knelt by Pab, looking at the flattened and dented metal that had been his featureless face.

“This is not the end,” he said, his hollow voice now almost incomprehensible.

“It kind of is. I know you meant well, but your fight is over.”

“I disagree.” Pab grasped Cynthia’s wrist firmly. The team shouted and began to move to assist, but Cynthia waved them back again. After a few moments Pab released her. Cynthia stood and staggered away looking disoriented. Nails began to beat Pab with his statue and did not stop until both golems more resembled abstract art than imitations of living forms.

“Cynthia?” Will said, trailing behind the woman as she wandered aimlessly in the dark.

“I’m fine,” she said. “We should go.”

“But are you--”

“I’m *fine!*” Cynthia snapped.

“Should we wait to see what’s left of the forge?” asked Jake.

Will looked from Jake to Cynthia as she disappeared into the dark and settling dust. “No,” he said. “We should get out of here. Nails, bring Pab’s body, we’ll melt it down to make sure he’s dead.”

“Ok,” Nails said as he pulled a shard of brick out of his shoulder, “but next time, someone else gets to take a few for the team.”

George was overjoyed to hear from the team when Jake called from his car’s spare Smileyphone™. On the way home Jake filled George in on what had happened and was in turn admonished to design new Jakecams™ that were more reliable. This led to a heated debate that continued the whole of the way back to the Mansion, while Nails rode in the bed of Marc’s truck, never taking his eyes off of Pab’s remains.

And Cynthia rode with Will, staring out her window. The Imprint had shown her much, but her moment of contact with Pab had shown her everything.

Pab lowered his arms and wiped his brow. It was a useless gesture, accomplishing nothing, but it was a motion inherited from Pab’s father, so he did not mind.

“Welcome,” he said, “to the world you will help to save.”

He held his hand out palm up and a globe appeared hovering there, shaded in greens, blues and browns, a representation of Rond. Tiny red lights began appearing all over the world’s landmasses, some marking various cities, others in mineral-rich regions.

“Many bodies. One mind. One purpose,” Pab said.

“Many bodies! One mind! One purpose!” chanted the golems arrayed before Pab, rows and rows of them, each one a perfect copy of Pab himself. Each of them with the same knowledge, the same

memories, the same capabilities. Each one knowing where in the world it was going on one of the outbound ships in the harbor, to make its own forge, raise its own army, save its own part of the world, while Pab, the first Pab, would remain in Ylelon with the Imprint, building his power there. Over the ages they would all build their power so that when the time came to reveal themselves they would be unstoppable.

They would be everywhere.