

The art of divination is one oft-maligned and frequently misunderstood, even among those who practice other forms of mysticism. Reading portents, receiving visions, watching subtle signs in an effort to know the course of the future is not an exact art, but one rather of nuance and intuition. As with any science devoted to interpreting current circumstances as a way of predicting future ones, much depends upon the signs available to be read. Many may be vague, obscure no matter the skill or wisdom possessed by the reader.

The homeless man known to his contemporaries as Old Smilin' Joe understood this very well. He spent much of his time alone in his room, tossing divination stones of his own making. Hour after hour, day after day, he threw large, smooth stones carved with strange markings that only he understood. The magic Joe used read lines of force in motion in the world around him and translated it into patterns in the fall of the stones.

What Joe saw in the stones was rarely pleasant. Hints of the wicked things that stalked the darkness of the haunted city of Ylelon mocked him day by day, appearing and disappearing in the signs on the stones like ripples in a stream. Other times there were dreadful signs of an inevitable future drawing near of a titanic creature of nightmare striding Ylelon's streets, destroying all in its path. These visions had long ago driven Smilin' Joe from his old life. Knowing what was out there had made it impossible for him to live day-to-day pretending the world was as it should be. Joe had left all vestiges of that life-that-was-a-lie behind to seclude himself where he could watch the approaching signs of a disaster he could not prevent.

But on one late winter night, as Joe huddled against one wall of his empty stone room casting his stones, the signs abruptly changed. In one toss there were the same maddening portents of evil lurking in the shadows: in the next a screaming warning of something approaching at that very moment.

Joe looked at the stones, reached for them with one ragged-nailed hand, hesitated. What he read in the symbols was not the same vague insinuations he normally saw but a definite, specific message. Quickly he snatched up the stones and threw them again. They fell in different places and arrangements, as respectable rocks should, but the spell guided them in their fall to still reflect the flow of cause and effect in the world, and so Joe read the same warning, the same sentence worded a different way: there was something coming. For *him*.

Smilin' Joe wasted no time gathering up the stones and tucking them away in a ragged pocket of his weathered greatcoat. He stood and shuffled into the hall as quickly as his bad leg would allow, calling to the others. His voice echoed in the timeless halls of his home, reverberating in empty rooms and out of rough-hewn windows.

Old Smilin' Joe and his neighbors did not dwell in any common derelict building. This home for those with no home was Fort Sorrin, a great bastion on a high ridge overlooking the northernmost reaches of Ylelon Bay from which the city's defenders had warded off invasions countless times in past centuries. Only in the last century, with the advent of modern warfare, had the towering stone walls and fortified rooms carved from the living rock of the high cliffs finally become obsolete and the historical landmark that had protected Ylelon for many generations was left abandoned. Very quickly afterward it became a sanctuary for some of the city's many homeless, but it only became a true safe haven when Smilin' Joe moved in.

None of the others living in the fort really understood why Joe could do the strange things he did. Those that were mentally sound enough to recognize that his foresight, his strange connection to the fort itself, were out of the ordinary, were wise enough to accept the protection he represented. The street people knew better than most that there were dark things hiding in Ylelon's shadows. They also knew that in the time since he had come to the fort, the hours he spent alone in his room, the strange things he muttered to himself while drawing lines in the dust in doorways and windowsills, the things in the shadows had all but completely left the fort alone.

So when Old Smilin' Joe came hobbling through the labyrinthine halls of the fort, shouting, the others paid heed. Though many of them were groggy from sleep or addled by cheap liquor, they listened as well as they were able.

"Everyone, quickly!" Joe called. "Come quickly!"

They came from their hiding places all throughout the massive fortress, some having to run to close the distance. They ran the gamut of age, race, background, gender, but all shared one thing in common: they were alarmed by the frightened tone of their protector.

"Everyone, you have to leave now!" Smilin' Joe said.

Protests filled the hall, some more coherent than others. Rather than argue or try to explain, Joe raised his voice above them all.

"There's no time! You all have to leave now! Get out of the fort and onto the street!"

Another chorus of protests, mostly variations of "What's happening?" and "Why?"

Joe's answer as he pushed against the crowd, trying to herd them away, was simple and vague like the divinations he read: "Something's coming."

It wasn't coming. It had already arrived.

It came through a tunnel on the south side of the fort, at street level. A rusted old gate barred the round-topped passageway until the thing tore it from its hinges and tossed it carelessly aside. Just beyond the gateway one of Joe's circles was traced in the dust. The magic Joe had placed in the patterns would discourage many of Ylelon's unusual creatures from crossing, but the golem paid it no mind. The edges of the lines shook and jumped in time with the golem's relentless footsteps as it walked past.

Fort Sorrin had been designed as a maze to deter invading forces. Passages made sharply angled turns, sometimes doubling alongside themselves. Rooms were spaced unevenly and rarely interconnected. Staircases were narrow spirals that ascended to the right as in castles of old. For that time the defenses were ideal, as any intruder would have to navigate the winding halls while battling swarms of Ylelon's soldiers.

But the golem was not deterred by the twisting corridors or the dark. It stopped to examine each and every room, methodically searching with endless patience. Its heavy steps resonated in the walls and floors, a perfectly rhythmic beat that announced the golem's arrival. Those residents that had not heard or heeded Smilin' Joe's warning now fled from the footfalls that made the ageless halls shake. The golem ignored them. It had come for one thing only. Anything that did not affect that goal elicited no response.

Smilin' Joe knew what that goal was, though he didn't know the reason behind it: the golem had come to kill him. He also knew that he had almost no hope of defeating or escaping it, but that would not stop him trying.

He was waiting for it as it stepped off of a staircase. The moment it saw him standing in the middle of the hall it began to walk toward him. The air around it crackled as electricity began to arc across its metal body in growing intensity with every step.

"I don't want any trouble," Smilin' Joe said as the golem came closer, so close that Joe's hair and beard stood up from the power in the air.

The golem raised both fists and drove them down into Joe's head. They passed through his long hair, his face, his chest and emerged from his body with no resistance. Joe rippled like the surface of a pond disturbed by a pebble and faded away to nothing.

If whatever intellect the golem possessed was surprised it showed no outward sign of it. Instead it immediately resumed its search, marching through the hall, checking every room, tiny bolts of lightning crawling across its skin.

In the second room the golem found Joe with his back to the door. Again it struck at him with lethal force: again it found him to be merely a facsimile as empty clothing and a ragged wig suspended on a crude wood frame crumbled beneath its blow. Light flared from within the shattered decoy as potent magic was released in an explosion that flung fragments of the dummy throughout the room, but the golem emerged unscathed. It walked from the smoke and flame in the room undistracted and continued its search for the homeless wizard, room by room.

It searched an entire floor, tirelessly examining each space in turn. What odd and meager possessions of the fort's residents the golem came across it tossed aside or ignored completely, while the occasional chair, couch or mattress was casually destroyed.

Smilin' Joe was waiting for the golem when it mounted the next flight of stairs. As it plodded up

the steps, its massive stature barely fitting through the confined space, Joe struck from above. The ancient graven stairs suddenly clung to the golem's feet, adhering with impossible strength. Cracks formed in the stone around the golem's feet as it strained to reach Joe, who stood barely out of reach, his brow furrowed in concentration. Light flared in the lines of wards Joe had traced upon the walls and the stone burst outward, a dozen and more explosions that sprayed jagged shards of rock across the golem's body.

Joe stumbled and fell backward on the steps, shielding his face with his arms. When he struggled to his feet a moment later, he could hear the rock of the steps still cracking under the patter of debris falling.

Cursing under his breath, Joe fled up the stairs. He had known the trap was a desperate ploy with meager hope of success, but there was little else he could do. He didn't understand why the golem was after him, but he knew the nature of such creations. The golem would follow him to the ends of the world, killing all that crossed its path in its efforts to get to him. As much as Joe had hated sending his neighbors out of shelter into the night, it was far safer for them outside right now.

Joe had only one desperate option left. He retreated from the golem while keeping it in sight, leading it down halls and up more stairs to the fourth level. Joe waited for it there by a particular spot in the ceiling, watching it come toward him with that maddening, unnaturally perfect stride. Soon it was only a few steps away and Joe began to focus--not on the golem, but on the ceiling just before it. The stone there was fractured, worn by time and erosion into little more than rubble braced against itself. Here, Smilin' Joe focused his will, using the connection he had spent years forging with the fort to coerce the rubble. At first there was barely a tremble, then a shudder that became a cascade of rock that fell just as the golem passed beneath it. Stones weighing scores and hundreds of pounds rained down on the golem's head and shoulders, making deep gonging sounds. Finally a huge slab fell across the construct's back, driving it to the floor as more stones piled atop it.

Smilin' Joe gasped and took a step back. He had actually pulled down more of the ceiling than he had intended. That, he decided, was a good thing. The pile of rubble now spanned the breadth of the hall and covered the golem completely. Slowly, Joe lowered his hands and relaxed. Against his expectations, he had put his meager skills to fine use and managed to survive something he had only read about.

The real task was still ahead. Joe would meditate and cast his stones in hope of learning who had sent this thing after him, and why. There were likely others in the city who had been targeted as well, perhaps even some who were actively seeking the golem's creator and could help track him or her down--

The clatter of stone on stone broke Joe's reverie. He stood and watched the pile of rubble. Here and there small rocks shifted and tumbled off of the pile, then a few larger pieces on one side shifted.

Joe grimaced.

A massive metal hand shoved through the loose rocks and clamped down on a large stone. The rubble shuddered, was still, shuddered again and began to fall aside as the golem struggled to free itself.

Joe looked on, horrified, almost disbelieving. Then he turned and ran.

Joe knew the golem would find him wherever he ran. He had neither the power nor the means to defend himself and he was unwilling to put others at risk by trying to flee. So, he waited for the golem on the rooftop.

Joe had always loved the view from the roof. Here on the pinnacle of the fortress, set on a shoulder of the Sentinels, one could see virtually the whole of Ylelon: the city and desert to the south and east, the ridges to the north, the boundless sea to the west, and far below, just beyond the parapets where Joe stood, the steep slopes and jagged rocks of the fort's foundation.

Presently Joe heard the golem reach the rooftop, plodding its way up an open staircase to the night air. Its iron body was dented and scarred from the collapsing ceiling, but it still walked tall, undistracted by its wounds. It saw Joe immediately and walked toward him, electricity beginning to crackle around it again, making it a strange blue-white torch in the darkness.

Joe turned to face the golem as it came closer. "I don't know who you are," he said, "or why you've sent your servant to kill me. I've never done anything to hurt anyone. I doubt I know you. If you can hear me, I want you to know this: I may not be able to escape you, but I can stop you from hurting

anyone else.”

He turned and climbed onto the parapets with a grunt just as the golem reached him. It seized his long coat with one hand and tried to pull him down, but Joe had been wearing his coat loosely on his shoulders so it fell away readily when pulled. With his heart pounding in his chest Joe backed to the very edge of the parapet, standing with the sheer drop beneath his heels. The golem, mindless thing that it was, kept his coat grasped in one hand, now singed and beginning to burn from the aura of lightning as it pulled itself up onto the parapet and reached for Joe.

With a frantic cry Joe grabbed the loose flaps of his coat and threw them over the golem's head. It reached for him, heedless of its own blindness, and Joe saw his chance, dodging the hand that crackled with lethal power and slipping behind the titan. He drove his hands against its back, ignoring the searing pain that shot through his hands and up his arms, shoving with all his might. The golem leaned, began to topple and turned just enough to seize Joe's wrist and pull him over the wall with it.

The shock of that moment melted into a profound peace for Joe as he plunged toward the rocks below. Though he had not desired death, after so long living in this place plagued by visions of a doom he could not prevent, knowing that this thing would follow him until the end of time, death would be a welcome release, sweetened by knowing that though he had failed to trick the golem it would at least now be destroyed with him.

The golem landing on a huge slab of rock with tremendous force, glancing off of it and falling again as the lightning left it with a tiny thunderclap. As it plummeted it crashed through a jutting shard of rock, breaking it into rubble that followed it as it careened down the slope. Only far below, where the rocks grew level just before merging with the beach, did the mangled golem finally roll to a stop. Joe's still-smoldering coat drifted down nearby to catch and hang draped over a large precipice.

Then, impossibly, the golem began to move. Deliberately as ever the construct, battered, dented, mangled, rose to its feet and began to walk along the beach, leaving behind only lop-sided footprints that smeared to the left as it limped. In time it was gone, leaving behind only the empty fort above and Joe's long coat, waving forlornly in the soft breeze.