

Ember and Magma

By B. I. Flight

The Lonely Winds are not the only troupe of monster hunters to ever operate in Ylelon. Far from it, in fact: over the centuries since the land was settled, countless individuals have taken it upon themselves to serve the public interest by seeking out and destroying dangerous elements of the supernatural that had permeated society. Their means and motives varied greatly, but were usually backed by a desire to do good.

Unfortunately, the lens of history rarely reveals motive, but more often reminds us that the road to hell often is paved with good intentions...

I

It was a balmy May evening in 1656 T E. Gray clouds veiled the sky from horizon to horizon and thunder rolled as though it were the heartbeat of the land itself. Most of the law-abiding population and many of the less savory elements were already indoors, securing themselves against the coming storm.

Such was not the case for a Yd man traveling by carriage through town toward the south-eastern stretches of the city. Though in later centuries that district would become an impoverished tangle of docks and warehouses, in the present day it was one of the wealthiest regions in the city, marked by private residences of grandiose volume and ostentatious design.

The curtains of the carriage were drawn and the man kept away from them, for his race was widely regarded by the occupying population of Ylelon as conquered savages. Even a Yd man with a gentleman's manners, livery and mode of transportation would be looked upon with suspicion for traveling openly in the wealthy borough.

The carriage stopped before the gate of a handsome mansion composed of native stone. The Yd stepped out of the carriage, politely thanked the driver and pushed through the gate, which he knew had been left unlocked for him. As he crossed the meticulously-tended garden of the grounds he greeted those of the multitude of servants he saw. They returned his courtesies discretely before returning to their labors with nervous glances around.

The Yd was received at the door by a butler and ushered through the austere halls to a library. There the manservant left him without announcing him and closed the doors. The room was windowless and dark, lit only by the large fireplace at the far end. A man in formal garb stood there with his back to the door, facing a massive heavy canvass that had been draped across something else, equally massive.

"Well, Edmond?" the Yd said as he strolled past thick shelves laden with expensive tomes, "what's so important that you had to call me all the way here in this weather?"

The man did not reply and only turned when his visitor had reached him. He regarded his guest with intelligent blue eyes before taking him in a warm embrace. "I have something to show you!" he said with great excitement, then turned and pulled the canvas down as though he were revealing a new marvel to an expectant crowd.

"Edmond!" gasped the Yd. "You finished them!"

"Yes, I did," replied Edmond. "I've not slept or eaten since yesterday, but the task is finally done."

"We were supposed to do it together!"

"Nyrid, calm yourself! The power was already stored and the book's instructions were quite clear. I started yesterday morning and found myself compelled by enthusiasm to finish without disturbing you."

Nyrid looked about, finally fixing his gaze on a huge book resting upright in an armchair by the fireplace. The tome was covered in thick, dark brown leather, the cover affixed with a device like the silhouette of a man of massive stature.

"You followed the instructions carefully?" he asked without looking away from the great volume.

"Yes, yes! Be calm for a change and celebrate!" Edmond picked up a wine bottle and a glass from a table next to the armchair and poured his companion a drink. "They are ready to be tested. Tonight we will take them to the Vale and see how they perform."

“*Tonight?* Are you mad? We must make arrangements to move them, have alibis in place--”

“Nyrid! We need no arrangements. I have told the household that we will be attending a wine-tasting party tonight. They will go with us in one of the carts under the canvas, long cloaks will hide our faces. There is nothing to fear.”

“You’re certain?” Nyrid huffed.

Edmond smiled. “Trust me. The influence these two will have in our city shall be felt for ages to come.”

The rain had not yet begun to fall, but the clouds gathering above had turned the spring evening as dark as a starless night. Few people walked the streets now. Nearly every window, door and hatch in the city was secured.

Yet in the slum known as the Thief’s Vale, down a lonely street that was little more than an alley staggered an unescorted woman. She had just been turned out of a tavern closing for fear of the weather and now wandered aimlessly, with her mind clouded by the fumes of cheap rum and wine. So inebriated was she that she did not notice the two strangers watching her from the darkness between two nearby shops. As she shuffled by they looked at one another with conspiratorial expressions and made as if to follow her.

“Perhaps it isn’t my place to say,” said a voice from nearby, “but I believe it is still considered quite uncouth to approach a lady in such a state while she is unescorted.”

The two ruffians turned at the sound and glared at the newcomer standing deeper in the alley, silhouetted in the shadows. “Who in hell are you?” one of them demanded.

“Oh, where are my manners? My name is Edmond. I am a citizen of some means and a mystic of some modest skill. In point of fact, that is how I came to be here. An augury hinted that an innocent life might be in danger here at this precise moment. Pardon my asking, but you two gentlemen wouldn’t be thinking of *harming* the lady, would you?”

“You’re dead, fool!” growled one of the attackers. He and his partner sneered, revealing abnormally long and sharp canines.

“If you feel that strongly about it, maybe you should discuss it with some friends of mine.”

Edmond stepped backward into the darkness. The vampires took him to be fleeing and began to follow him. When a dark shape loomed out of the shadows they took it to be the fool at first, but quickly they realized that it was much larger than the man that had taunted them. Still they approached, thinking the fool believed that some oafish bodyguard would be able to protect him. One of them raised a hand and struck the figure, expecting to brush him aside with ease: he was startled when his blow was ineffective as his hand touched not living flesh but a rigid surface, unyielding and distressingly hot.

The figure struck back immediately with a blow that flung the vampire half the distance through the alley toward the street, leaving him stunned. The other dead man began to back away from the new menace, his bravado gone. His shock redoubled as the dark figure began to radiate light from within, an angry red glow that ran in cracks and patches across its form. Moment by moment the light grew in intensity until the figure was its own light source. The would-be killer saw what he knew should be impossible: the thing before him was a massive automaton of embers and coals in the rough form of a man.

The vampire turned to flee, hopping over the still form of his comrade. The street was only paces away, the light at the end of the tunnel--

--replaced by darkness and pain as something fell from above and landed scarce inches in front of the runner. He tumbled backward, grasping at the bloodied ruin of his face, saw through stinging tears what had blocked his path. A second figure more massive in frame than the first now barred the way. Ragged skin of stone was broken by veins of liquid rock that glowed an angry red. The creature was a walking statue of volcanic rock that carried an immense stone war hammer in thick hands well-suited to the task. The vampire screamed once as the hammer was lifted and swung in a rising arc, then brought downward in a crushing blow that ended the scream and shattered several of the bricks on the uneven alley floor.

The cry and the impact helped to rouse the other vampire. He rolled onto his side and shook his head as if to clear his vision when the first creature grasped him by roughly by the shirt and raised him into the air. He struggled to free himself, but when he clutched the creature's arms the flesh of his hands was scorched. The creature's face loomed close, a smooth plane featureless but for three trapezoids arranged in the semblance of eyes and a mouth, wherein glowed the light of a raging furnace.

"What the hell are you?" the vampire hissed. His shirt began to burn, the flames spreading to run through his hair and flesh. He screamed and struggled but was a helpless captive in the strange creature's grip. The light in its eyes and mouth flared brighter and the flames doubled in size so that the undead became a shrieking pyre. Still the creature held him, stock-still, as dispassionate and unmoving as a mountain.

Finally, mercifully, the screams ceased. The creature casually released the charred remains to fall next to the pulped mess of the other vampire, then stood attentively facing Edmond. The creature with magma skin came to stand beside its brother. They waited there, as still as statues, eerily silent but for the rush of heating air around them, waiting for instructions.

"What do you think?" Edmond said.

Nyrid came from the shadows behind him. His normally mahogany skin was unusually pale. "I am at a loss for words."

"Yes, they're magnificent, aren't they?" said Edmond proudly.

"No, Edmond!" Nyrid turned toward his companion, in part to avert his eyes from the horrid sight of the vampires, one crushed by a hammer weighing more than several grown men, the other burned to a cinder. "I wanted to create protectors for the low classes of the town, not these abominations! To see such cruelty from things we made ourselves..."

"You exaggerate as usual, my love. There was no cruelty here. We only told the golems to destroy the vampires and they did as we instructed. They are no more capable of malice than a fire."

"And every bit as destructive."

"Do they meet with your approval, or not?"

Nyrid sighed. "Did you name them?"

"I did! They are called 'Tarmo' and 'Temen'."

Nyrid suppressed a scornful response. Though he appreciated Edmond's good intentions and interest in his own culture, the poor fool was as lacking in creativity as he was in foresight. Tarmo and Temen were simply the Yd words for "ember" and "magma."

"They will obey us?" the Yd asked.

"Us, and only us. It was part of the creation process."

"You two! Here is your mission now. At dawn each day, you will return to my library and conceal yourselves. At dusk you will hunt and destroy those that prey upon the innocent. Hide yourselves from the eyes of others at all times. Do you understand?"

Both golems nodded in perfect tandem.

"Excellent! Go forth and do your work."

The golems raced away into the tangle of simple shops and domiciles in the vale. Both men heard the steady beat of their footsteps as they hurried into the gathering gloom.

"I see we'll have to work with them on the concept of stealth," Edmond quipped.

"This isn't what I wanted, Edmond," said Nyrid. "I thought we were making protectors of my people, not these soulless engines of brutality."

"Give them a fair chance at least, will you?" Edmond huffed. "Let them do their work for a few weeks. Your people will stop disappearing and being murdered without recourse. I promise you that."

"Now, come back to the manor with me. I have yet to show you the best part."

They journeyed back to Edmond's home and returned to the library. There Edmond directed Nyrid to sit in a chair by the fireplace and produced a tiny wooden chest from a nearby shelf.

"The means to create these were described in the manual," he said as he opened the box. Contained within, set in felt, were two orbs small enough to fit easily in the palm of a hand. One perfectly

matched the appearance of Ember, glowing like an angry coal, while the other could have been fashioned from the very body of Magma.

“Touch one,” Edmond invited.

Though he doubted the wisdom of it, Nyrid did as he was bidden, reaching for the magma sphere. The instant his fingers brushed it his senses reeled: he was no longer sitting in Edmond’s library but running through an alley in the Thief’s Vale. He could smell the rank odors of the place, feel the shock of his heavy feet pacing on the weathered brick, hear the thunder overhead. Next to him the Ember Golem ran, looking much smaller than it had before, while up ahead a tiny-seeming figure fled, running faster than any person should have been able to but still losing ground to the pursuers.

Nyrid flinched so that his fingers left the orb and was again in the library as though he had awakened suddenly from a vivid dream.

“I saw as the golem does,” he said in amazement.

“Not just so,” Edmond replied as he leaned down next to Nyrid’s ear, “in time, I will teach you to use these artifacts to *control* the golems. They will act at your behest as does your very own flesh. You and I together will rid Ylelon of evil.”

Nyrid stared for a long moment at the orbs, but said nothing.

II

Ember and Magma did their work quite well in the months to come. The Thief’s Vale became as dangerous a place for the undead as it had been for the living. The two golems relentlessly patrolled the poor districts and the areas nearby, destroying every vampire they found as dispassionately as forces of nature. They killed other things as well, creatures that walked in the guises of women and men, slithery things unlike any natural life and shapeless beasts with no right to exist in a sane world. The lives of the downtrodden became considerably better: though poverty still reigned and crime and disease remained rampant, the things in the shadows took far less prey and were far more likely to hesitate before doing so.

The efforts of the golems did not go unnoticed. Despite Edmond’s instructions it was nearly impossible for such beings to pass unseen. Soon rumors and folktales with tones bordering on open praise ran among the neighborhoods. They spoke of the benevolent guardians haloed in fire that smote the wicked and left footprints of scorched brick and boiling mud, one that commanded fire at its bidding, the other with the strength of a mountain, swinging a great hammer.

It did not take long for Edmond’s ambitions to increase. He soon added mortal criminals to the golem’s “to do” list. In this they used extreme, but non-lethal, force, and mostly confined their efforts to perpetrators of heinous acts such as murder and rape; still, more than one opiate peddler and pickpocket found themselves soundly beaten and severely burned by hulking dark shapes that fell on them from the darkness and returned there afterward.

As the months crawled by Nyrid’s misgivings slowly disappeared. Many an evening he spent with Edmond, watching the golems through the magic spheres. He continuously refused Edmond’s offers to learn to guide the constructs’ actions, preferring to remain an impartial observer to the soulless destruction. Edmond reveled in controlling the golems, especially Ember, and kept a diary of their nightly exploits. Nyrid failed to understand why--it seemed to him that their mission became monotonous as night after night they searched, often finding nothing, sometimes finding some wicked beast they would dispatch, usually after a very one-sided fight.

One of the few notable incidents came late in the second November of the golems’ lives. On that chilly evening Edmond and Nyrid were both seated in the library, Nyrid with the magma orb on a pillow in his lap, Edmond with the ember orb clasped tightly in both hands.

The golems had been stalking among the shops of the Thief’s Vale when a muffled cry from somewhere close by drew their attention. They rushed to the scene, Edmond and Nyrid watching. When they turned a corner they beheld a female vampire with her fangs fixed in a terrified youth’s neck. The monster was barefoot, draped in the tattered remains of a work dress. She lacked the pale complexion of typical vampires: Nyrid observed absently that she had likely been dead less than a month.

Magma leapt to the attack, racing forward and swinging his hammer in a line-drive motion. The vampire saw motion out of the corner of her eye and sprang backward just in time to avoid the blow, taking her victim with her. When Magma hurried forward in pursuit the vampire shoved the youth forward, into the golem.

Back in the library both Nyrid and Edmond squirmed as their ears filled with the tortured screams of a young man who was miles away.

Magma had acted as if by reflex to catch the youth. The instant they made contact, red-hot stone made soft flesh sizzle and burn. For all its ability to destroy the golem had no understanding of how to preserve and, to Nyrid's horror, it continued to hold the limp young man as its fiery touch cooked him alive.

Desperately Edmond threw the ember sphere to the floor and snatched the magma sphere from Nyrid. At his silent command Magma shied away from the youth, who flopped helplessly onto the alley floor, still screaming.

"Edmond!" Nyrid shouted, "we have to help--"

"Quiet, you fool!" Edmond snapped as he directed his will into the orb. Miles away the magma golem reached down gingerly and touched the tips of the fingers of one hand to the ragged wounds on the youth's neck, cauterizing them at the expense of another gale of shrieks.

"That is all we can do for him," Edmond said regretfully. The two golems straightened to attention, heedless of the injured man at their feet, then fled away down the alley as Edmond gave them each new instructions in turn.

"What are they doing?" Nyrid asked.

"I commanded them to depart from the area. They cannot be associated with this incident."

"Cannot be--Edmond, that man needs a surgeon! Quickly!"

"What would you have me do?" Edmond threw his hands helplessly into the air. "Have the golems perform field surgery? Perhaps others will find the young man, perhaps not, but I do not expect him to live through the night either way."

"This is unacceptable, Edmond! The golems were created to protect the people, not mangle them and leave them to die!"

"Calm yourself, Nyrid. This was a tragedy, but it was one event! Think of the good we have done in these past months! The residents of what was once the most dangerous district in the city now no longer fear to go out of doors after dark."

Nyrid crossed his arms. "Unless they run into our bastard children."

"There's no talking to you when you're like this," Edmond groaned. "Perhaps you should retire for the evening."

"Perhaps I shall," was the curt reply.

"Very well. Please show yourself out."

Staring daggers at Edmond, Nyrid turned and stormed out of the room.

III

In time Nyrid forgave his lover for his rudeness, but that evening was the beginning of a schism between them. Nyrid stopped monitoring the golems for fear of what he might see. More than once the agonized screams of the young man from the alley returned to him in torturous dreams. As the weeks of winter crawled by and eased into spring Nyrid came to call less and less often until his daily visits were almost monthly ones. He missed Edmond terribly and tried to lose himself in running his fishmongery on the southern edge of the Thief's Vale, but now and again he would hear a piercing scream in the night that made him cover his ears and pray for dawn.

Edmond grew increasingly distant in those days, rarely venturing outside and leaving the management of his household to his staff. He could not bring himself to admit, even to himself, that his ambition had overcome his good sense in making the golems. At first his motives had been pure enough: to create guardians that could defend Nyrid, his people, and the squalid slum they were forced to call

home. That was why Edmond had turned his considerable resources to finding the tome that now sat forgotten on a low shelf in the library.

In the time he had spent poring over the tome Edmond's imagination had been fired. The book described the magic for animating a figure of lifeless material, giving it great strength and a semblance of intellect. Formulae in the volume described not only these basic automatons but also an astonishing array of attributes they could be imbued with. There were golems that could channel the power of storms through their bodies, others that could mimic the strange senses of those said to have a "third eye," and even a few that would work some magic of their own. Edmond debated for days with himself about which variant to begin with before settling on Ember and Magma: what better way to purge the evil of Ylelon than with the cleansing power of fire?

Originally Edmond had aspired to create every variant in turn, eventually constructing a small army that would scour the evil from the Thief's Vale and eventually, all of Ylelon. The near-total loss of Nyrid's companionship, however, quickly sapped the ambition for such effort from Edmond even as his self-imposed exile wore away at his compassion. He became increasingly desensitized, which was reflected in the actions of the golems that responded to his thoughts and emotions even as he lived vicariously through them. Once he had directed them only to subdue the most vicious and criminal of living people: now even the most petty act brought crushing retribution. A slap that would once only have disarmed a knife-wielding thug became a strike that shattered a hand; a push that once felled a fleeing thief long enough for others to catch up to him became a blow that cracked ribs.

By the fourth year of the golems' activities Edmond had become almost completely detached. On a sweltering evening in July of that year Ember and Magma chased an opiate dealer for two blocks before cornering him against the side wall of a Yd temple. There Magma killed the terrified man by smashing him against the wall with its hammer. Some dim part of Edmond rebelled at this sight of this atrocity, but it was buried deeply beneath frustration, resentment, and self-pity. If the intellect's magic had given to the golems were aware of their master's inner turmoil, they showed no sign of it as they left the peddler's mangled remains behind and returned to the shadows.

The stories told in the Thief's Vale had changed. They no longer spoke reverently of fiery guardians but whispered warnings of brutal enforcers that mercilessly punished even the most minor transgression. The innocent came to fear being outdoors after dark as much as the wicked. Catching a glimpse of the "defenders" of the Vale became regarded as a harbinger of bad luck.

Still...those dark and slithery things that had once preyed so freely upon the residents of the Vale had all but disappeared. Most that remained had long since sought safety elsewhere in the city, while those few that came newly to the region rarely survived long enough to learn from their mistakes. Children and lone travelers now rarely vanished in the night and many families slept more soundly even as manlike shapes of burning stone made the ground tremble with their stride.

IV

In the early Spring of 1662 Nyrid journeyed by carriage to Edmond's estate much as he had done so many times before. The weather had been mild and the air was cool but not unpleasant, yet Nyrid wore the look of a man bearing dire news. When he arrived at the estate he marched to the library without any hint of his usual pleasantries to the staff.

When he found Edmond, Nyrid had to stifle a shocked gasp, for there seemed to be little left of the man that had meant so much to him. Once a well-primped and immaculately-dressed socialite, Edmond now looked the part of a recluse many years beyond his own age. His hair and nails were filthy and unkempt, his clothes reeking wads of once-fine material, his eyes bloodshot and staring with a look that hinted at madness.

"Edmond," Nyrid said and fought to steady himself, "we need to talk."

"What of? Another lecture?" Edmond's voice, too, had decayed, falling from a regal tenor to a sickly croak. "You abandon me only to return and cast aspersions on my work?"

Nyrid shook his head sadly and sat in a chair next to Edmond's. "I didn't abandon you, Edmond. I

stopped calling because I couldn't bear to watch what you were doing in the Vale. To yourself."

"Ah! Come to gloat, then? You were right after all! My desire to do good has laid low the scion of twelve generations of wealth and nobility. Behold Lord Edmond, for he is proof that no good deed goes unpunished!"

"Edmond," Nyrid said very clearly and slowly, "something is very wrong in the Vale."

Edmond settled back into his chair. "Of course there is! That's why we did all this to begin with. Remember?"

"Not that. There's something the golems haven't found. It's killing night after night. At least seventeen people in the last fortnight."

"Nonsense," scoffed Edmond. "I would have discovered such a prolific killer and stopped it."

"I've seen the bodies, Edmond! I've seen the ravaged dead this creature leaves behind. At first I thought they were only the work of some straggler that Ember and Magma had missed, but when they kept coming, new bodies every morning--"

"There is no need for concern, Nyrid. I will guide Temen and Tarmo to seek this new interloper until it is destroyed."

"We don't have the time!" Nyrid nearly shouted. It was the only time Edmond could recall seeing genuine fear on Nyrid's face.

Nyrid took something from his pocket and laid it across the stand between the two chairs. It was a rough scrap of an old shirt with lines drawn in charcoal. The lines formed a crude map of a small part of the Thief's Vale. Nyrid produced a piece of charcoal from a pocket and narrated as he made marks among the sketched buildings:

"The first night, a stranger left in this alley. The second, a whore left in the middle of this street. The third, in this shack, a cobbler, his wife, their two children. The fourth, a fisherman left on his own front step."

Edmond watched with detachment at first as the simple black marks told a story of ended lives. Slowly the madness in his eyes became horror as he realized what the map revealed: the bodies of the slain had been left night by night in an almost perfect circle with a single structure at its center: Nyrid's shop.

"Whatever is doing this, it wants me," Nyrid said.

When Edmond finally managed to take his eyes off the map he sent for the butler, to whom he gave instructions to tell the entirety of the staff to retire to their rooms and not emerge under any circumstances until sunrise. He also had the butler bring him fresh clothing, some toiletries, and hot soup for both himself and Nyrid before sending the man to his room for the day.

"What are you thinking?" Nyrid asked as Edmond cleaned himself up as best he could. "This creature is hunting me, not your servants."

"Don't you understand?" Edmond nearly shouted. "There is no reason for any random beast to make such an elaborate effort to threaten you. Whatever is doing this must know of your connection to the golems! It must have been watching both them and you for many months to know this."

"How could it know? I've not been near them--"

"They hide here during the day, you fool! A patient watcher could have tracked them in the early morning, then needed only to observe this house until you made one of your rare visits."

"But why go to so much trouble? Why wait so long after my last visit to threaten me so?" In frustration Nyrid kicked over the stand holding his map.

"I know not, nor will I gamble at guessing the reason. Until we are certain this threat has been dealt with we will stay here, guarded by the golems. I will teach the severity of the mistake in seeking to play mind games with me.

"Get some soup and some rest. The evening may prove quite long for us."

When sundown finally came Nyrid was already mentally exhausted. He had never before spent an entire day under the specter of a death threat and it proved to be quit tiring. Unable to sleep, Nyrid

fidgeted through all the long hours to the evening so that he was almost relieved when the sun set. Almost.

Now he and Edmond sat in their chairs by the fireplace, watching the doors at the far end of the room. Magma stood at the midway point between them brandishing its hammer, while Ember patrolled the house with instructions to strike down anything it encountered. From time to time the two men could hear the golem's heavy footsteps as it jogged through the halls overhead and Nyrid tried to imagine what the befuddled servants must think was happening. He also guessed at the mess the statue would make of the rugs if it were hot while it ran and, for the first time in what felt like ages, he smiled to himself.

Evening wore on and finally Edmond and Nyrid dozed, too exhausted mentally to bear the torturous passing of the seconds any longer. On into the night they slept, while Magma kept as still as death and Ember's footsteps passed nearby now and again like some bizarre traveling metronome.

Deep into the morning Nyrid awoke with a start. He thought that as he slept he had heard someone scream, but now he could not tell if it were real or only a dream. In the seconds that followed he held very still and listened. There were no sights or sounds that suggested anything amiss, yet Nyrid could not shake the feeling that something was... wrong.

Quickly he rose from his chair and padded forth on slipper-clad feet to stand by Magma. Even cooled to avoid starting a fire where it stood, the golem radiated an unpleasant amount of warmth. The thing completely ignored Nyrid as he approached it and he found himself wondering how it perceived him. Did it recognize him as the man that had chiseled its features when it was only a slab of stone? Or was he merely a part of its environment that it saw no need to interact with?

The thought led him to an idea. "Golem," he said, "go into the halls and ensure that everything is as it should be."

Magma ignored him. Perhaps in recent years Edmond had ordered it not to regard Nyrid as an authority figure for whatever reason. It hardly mattered now. Nyrid worked his way toward the library doors, listening intently for any hint of trouble.

When he finally reached the doors he put one ear to the carved wood paneling and listened. Only silence reigned beyond, so far as Nyrid could discern, and finally it dawned on him what felt wrong: in the entire time since he had been awakened he had not heard Ember's rhythmic footfalls.

Stark fear gripped him as he tried to imagine what it meant. Had some odd happenstance preoccupied the golem? This seemed unlikely, for Nyrid knew that once the golems were set to a purpose they could no more become distracted than any other stone. Had some hostile force overpowered Ember, then? The thought that anything capable of such a feat was present in the house made Nyrid's blood run cold.

Slowly he began to back away from the door, wanting only to wake Edmond and take refuge behind the stoic Magma. That was when he again heard the scream, a pained cry from nearby in the hall, unmistakably not a dream.

Nyrid froze. Something was happening so nearby that he could hear it even through the doors. The humble fishmonger wrestled with his instinct to flee to safety and his impulse to help one in need: whether through nobility or lack of good sense Nyrid did not know, but the impulse won out. He grasped the doorknob, turned it and peered out into the hall.

The passageway was quite dim, lit only by what star and moonlight found its way inside through the odd windows and doors of adjacent rooms. To the right all was clear, so far as Nyrid could tell in the darkness, but when he looked to the left his breath seized. Just at the very edge of what light leaked from the library was one of the maids, clad only in her modest white nightgown. She was a very attractive Yd woman, but her features were contorted in an expression of great pain; she was twitching or shuddering and appeared to be standing on the tips of her toes. Her mouth twitched as if she meant to speak, but each effort to form words ended as a noiseless gasp.

"My lady?" Nyrid whispered as he inched closer to her, silently cursing himself for being unable to remember her name. "Is something wrong?"

The maid's expression became one of pleading and she reached out a hand as if to seek aid: but

then a final spasm ran through her body, her eyes rolled back in her head and she toppled forward lifelessly onto the floor.

Nyrid's horror at the sight redoubled as he realized there was someone else in the hallway with him, someone whom had been hidden behind the maid and now stood over her lifeless body, watching him. Her dark garments were hard to make out in the shadows, but her skin was so pale that her face shone ghost-like in the abyssal hall. Her arms were visible also, from the shoulders of the work dress she wore, but cut off mysteriously midway between her elbows and wrists. It took Nyrid's eyes a moment to adjust to the dark well enough to realize why: her lower arms were covered in dark blood.

"I was wondering when you were going to come out of there," she said casually.

"Y-you," Nyrid stammered as he backed away. "What are you?"

"Covered in blood, obviously," was the irreverent response. "These people's blood is so thin. The master of the house isn't feeding them well. I must speak to him about it."

"You must leave here immediately!" Nyrid said, hoping he sounded much more brave and commanding than he felt. "Powerful guardians are coming to destroy you."

The woman half-smiled, a surprisingly unpleasant sight. "You mean the pile of hot rocks that spent so much of the evening running about like a vagabond? It would have been wiser to set it searching carefully for signs of an intruder. Not that this would have helped."

"He will return soon," Nyrid said, but he knew it was a hopeless bluff. If Ember were going to return, it would have already done so.

"Oh, I don't think we'll hear from him for some time," the woman replied. "This young lady was most helpful in assuring that." She reached down and, grasping the maid's body by the back of the neck, lifted it and held it upright as easily as if it were a bundle of rags.

"She had a lover, did you know that? She whispered to him in her dreams as I stole into her room and thought I was him when I touched her cheek. Imagine the poor thing's terror when I seized her by the throat and dragged her into the hall."

Nyrid was speechless.

"The man of coals came by presently," continued the monster, "and I knew that he might find my being here objectionable. This kind thing was so good as to babble senselessly about a demon. With a bit of my encouragement, the puppet gestured to a nearby window. The great oaf dove through it into the garden without hesitation! I hope your other defenders are smarter than he was. Tricking him was a bit too easy. Isn't that right, dear?"

The maid's head tilted backward so that her glassy eyes came to meet Nyrid's own. He turned and ran back into the library in a blind panic, screaming for Edmond, who came awake in a groggy haze.

"Nyrid? What in the world are you--" His words died as he saw the library in the dim light of the remnants in the fireplace, Nyrid running toward him looking more terrified than Edmond had ever seen him; Magma only now beginning to move toward the far end of the room; and framed in the doorway, the wraith-like visage of a woman in peasant's clothing, her arms and dress soaked in blood.

Edmond awoke instantly and fumbled about for the spheres. Magma's was wedged in the cushions of his chair, while Ember's rested some distance away on the rug where it had rolled when Edmond had dropped it in his slumber. With a grunt he flung himself onto the floor after it. As his fingers closed around it he was startled to find his senses projected into the garden where Ember prodded gingerly at an overgrown shrub. The golem turned immediately at Edmond's command and came at a dead run for the house, letting the master retrieve his mind from the orb.

Nyrid was just reaching him, babbling something about one of the maids. Magma was bare moments away from falling upon the apparition in the doorway. Edmond smiled to himself: this panic would soon be dealt with as Magma raised its hammer for a running blow that would surely crush the intruder's bones--

--except that the creature gracefully stepped away from the blow at the last moment. The hammer crashed against the doorframe and reduced the fine carved wood to flinders. The invader ducked under the hammer's head as it was pulled free of the ruined frame, then ducked again when it was swung at her in a line drive. She fled away into the room, Magma lumbering after her, Nyrid and Edmond watching

breathlessly.

Magma struck out again, swinging its hammer in a high arc. The woman saw it coming and barely weaved out of the way in time: the hammer's head passed so close to her body that it scraped the front of her dress before crashing into the floor, where it tore through the rug and made the floorboards blossom upward in strange petals of broken wood.

The woman seized that moment with a bold maneuver: she hopped onto the handle of the hammer before Magma could lift it free of the floor, ran up it and struck the golem full in the face. Edmond's heart seized in his chest when he saw that she had managed to hurt it: its molten face bore the mark of her hand as though it had been pressed into soft clay.

No matter, Edmond told himself, *a scratch on the surface will not win the fight.*

Magma proved the point by hauling its hammer upward, forcing the invader to fall backwards. She turned over in the air and landed lightly on her feet, then dodged nimbly aside as the hammer bore down on her again. Nyrid thought he heard laughter as the woman weaved around the assaults of the slower golem and a chill ran down his spine when she turned aside a hammerhead lunge with a smooth motion of her arm. The way she moved, the techniques she used, were eerily similar to the ancient combat arts practiced by Nyrid's people, too similar to be coincidence. The secrets of Enton were closely guarded by the Yd and never shared with outsiders. This white woman was no Yd warrior: how had she learned these things?

Edmond thumped his fist on the floor and cursed in frustration as Magma demolished a writing desk with another missing swing. Watching the battle was excruciating, for the woman was a tiny slip of a girl that Magma should have broken like a twig, yet she toyed with the golem as though it were all a game.

What terrified Edmond, the realization that he almost could not acknowledge to himself, was that the woman had planned this assault. Her goal in watching Nyrid, in slaughtering a neighborhood of innocent people, all had been an act calculated to drive him here. Now, he and Edmond were isolated in the middle of the night with a relentless killer between them and the only way out, sporting with their supposedly invincible guardian. Worse, Edmond knew that she had chosen this place for a tactical reason. At first glance the home of a wizard might seem like a poor choice to besiege, but that wizard was a decrepit wreck and worse, his powerful defenders could not use the full scope of their talents in the manor lest they turn it into a burning deathtrap. As Edmond watched the intruder dance her way toward a bookshelf around a flurry of hammer swings a grim certainty settled into his mind. This was no random attack or even some kind of impulsive retribution for the unleashing of the golems, but a carefully orchestrated plan, one that likely had been months in the making.

The pale woman backed against a bookshelf and Magma raised its hammer high: before Edmond could warn it the golem swung its weapon in a high arc. The hammerhead caught the forward edge of several high shelves in its decent, cracking them in two so that as the woman leapt aside the shelves spilled their priceless contents down upon Magma. Distracted by the dozens of heavy volumes raining down upon it, Magma did not notice the intruder hauling on the damaged bookcase until it was too late. What volumes remained on the piece now tumbled from it onto the beleaguered golem. The wood followed close behind, slamming Magma to the floor and pinning it there. While it rustled and shuddered as the golem struggled to free itself the woman hopped onto its back and began to dig through the piles of pages and thick bindings. She found what she sought just as Magma's right arm battered through the shelves: the hammer. She hefted the weapon, larger than she was, with impossible ease and swung it just as Magma's head broke through a pile of splintered wood and scattered books. The amorphous stone of the golem's head became grotesquely deformed when the hammer struck it; a second blow reduced it to a completely unrecognizable mess atop the golem's shoulders. Magma continued to struggle, thrashing about to free itself and swinging its fists blindly.

The woman had moved well out of reach of Magma's desperate efforts as soon as she had crushed its head. Now she was watching it like a hawk: Edmond guessed that she had assumed destroying the head would finish the golem and was now evaluating the situation. As soon as Magma had freed itself from the wreckage and stood again the woman leapt forward, battering it mercilessly with the hammer.

Magma lashed out, but blind as it was it was virtually helpless. In mere moments the woman had smashed it into a shapeless lump that ceased to move. Edmond felt the soft pulse of released energy that signaled the golem's demise, then the woman was walking toward him and Nyrid. She bared glistening fangs in a wicked grin as she drew near with Magma's hammer laid back across one shoulder.

"Keep your distance!" Edmond shouted. He raised one hand, which glowed with a nimbus of golden light. The woman stopped with her eyes fixed on the eldritch glow.

"That's a magnificent talent," she said slowly. "I had wondered what other gifts the makers of the stone men might possess."

Behind her, Ember appeared in the doorway. Edmond sent a single command through the orb he clasped in his hand and Ember crept into the room as quietly as possible with its hands held out toward her head.

"Why are you here?" Edmond asked in a bid to buy time. Ember was only seconds away from crushing the intruder's skull...

"You don't remember me, do you? The woman asked with a coy grin. "Five years ago, a nook between one shack and another, a nameless vampire, a nameless victim. But you wouldn't remember that, would you? It's quite ordinary for you, I suppose."

Edmond barely suppressed a gasp as the woman spun and struck Ember with the butt of the hammer's handle. Ember's upper body turned sharply around from the force of the blow, then rotated back with surprising quickness as the golem retaliated with a crushing back-fist to the woman's jaw. The vampire was thrown twisting into the air. The hammer came free of her grip and was deftly caught by Ember, who began to swing it before the monster had even touched the ground. A flutter of hope ran through Edmond's heart--and then the woman caught the haft of the hammer as she landed and they wrestled for the weapon, the slender walking corpse and the man of coals, grappling back and forth as Edmond marveled that any mere vampire could be strong enough to match the golem. Still, Ember's height and weight gave it an advantage that let it force the vampire backward until the rug tore beneath her feet and her footing gave way. She stumbled and Ember yanked the hammer from her grasp. Edmond smiled and Nyrid actually cheered as Ember raised the hammer above its head for the killing blow; but the vampire recovered her footing and lunged forward with startling speed. Faster than Edmond could see she delivered blow after blow to the golem's face, distorting its features beyond recognition in the time it took for the war hammer to slip from Ember's fingers and fall to the floor. Now the golem's thrashings mirrored those of its brother's, swinging wildly and producing massive bursts of flame that curled into the air and wisped away into nothing in a futile effort to defend itself, even as the vampire battered it into a formless lump. In less than two minutes a single vampire had reduced the second golem to a lump of coals.

"Now then," she said as she picked up the stone hammer and faced Nyrid and Edmond, "where were we?"

"Stay back, creature!" Edmond warned as the golden nimbus appeared around his hand again, "keep away, or I'll--"

With a single smooth motion the vampire tossed the hammer underhanded toward the couple. The head slammed down on the floor just in front of Edmond so that the handle toppled over onto him, smashing him to the floor and pinning him there. He was held down with the handle across his thigh and torso.

"Edmond!" Nyrid cried as he struggled to lift the heavy weight. He and Edmond together could not even budge it. Then a grip like cold steel seized Nyrid by the neck and lifted him into the air.

"Satisfy my curiosity," the woman cooed as Nyrid frantically grasped the hand that held him aloft. "Are you also able to weave magic?"

Nyrid only coughed and gagged in response.

"Let him go!" Edmond wheezed.

"But you can't, can you?" the woman said, ignoring Edmond completely. "If you could you would have during the fight. And now that I've threatened you," she fixed her gaze on Edmond, "I know that your paramour has no magic that can save either of you."

“NOOO!” Edmond screamed as the vampire clamped her teeth onto Nyrid’s neck. He fought and struggled and cursed, held down helpless as the seconds ticked past and Nyrid’s panicked thrashing lessened. Finally the monster let him fall to the floor, where he lay, eyes wide, breathing shallow, bleeding copiously from grotesque wounds in his neck and mouthing voiceless words to Edmond: “I love you.”

“You *bitch!*” Edmond screamed with what little breath he could draw. “Why? Why did you do this to us? To him? Is it for revenge? Did we wrong you somehow in a way that brought this upon us?”

“Oh, the conceit,” the woman chuckled. Striding to Edmond’s side, she easily lifted the hammer off of him and grasped him by his shirt when he tried to crawl away.

“This was never about you. It was about *this*.” She swept the hammer toward the massive stacks.

“You taught me an invaluable lesson that night in the alley. Imagine how shocked I was when two walking statues took me by surprise and tried to kill me. That evening taught me to never become complacent. New and unexpected things can assault me at any time. I must be the superior of any of them, lest I face my own extinction.

“So I sought wisdom and asked questions. I learned what the statues were and that it took magic of considerable power to give them life. These five years I have learned warrior traditions--with a little persuasion for some of the native masters of those arts--and how to apply them to my own limits. When I was ready I studied the habits of the golems and their master, to prepare for the time when I would take their power for myself.”

Edmond was now crying unashamedly. “You...all of this, these lives...you did all of this just to take my books?”

“The house as well. It was very kind of you to distance yourself from society these past months. It will give me privacy as I study. The only remaining factor is your staff. Let’s meet them one by one, shall we?”

Edmond could only scream as the vampire dragged him past his lover’s body and out the library doors.

Centuries ago a well-meaning dilettante mage and his sculptor partner set about a plan to purge their city of the evils that plagued it. While they did tremendous good in their own time, the shadow of their actions created an evil that would do incalculable harm in the ages to come, for they had inspired and empowered the nameless vampire that would one day become the Crown of Thorns.