

Prologue

A thoughtful man once said, “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.”

As is the case with most wisdom, the value of this teaching is, appropriately enough, often only appreciated in retrospect. All too frequently a great tragedy is required to remind people that they cannot come to be where they are without being where they’ve already been. The sins of the past can often return to haunt an individual, an organization, or a community long after they have been forgotten.

If the lone occupant of the small yacht that skidded across the waters of Ylelon Bay was reflecting on this philosophy, it gave no outward sign of it. It was very early in the morning of the day after the Lonely Winds’ journey to the campus of Ylelon University. The yacht’s pilot was none other than the Glass Man. The creature’s sculpted crystalline expression was inscrutable as it navigated the pitch black night without the aid of stars, charts, or modern equipment, using only the motions of a peculiar copper compass held in an open palm as a guide. Though the Glass Man’s appearance had not changed since the Lonely Winds first saw it two days before, it now moved very differently, with the practiced precision of one accustomed to the controls of a yacht. In fact, the construct’s every mannerism was a perfect mirror of the owner of the craft, who had been enjoying a quiet evening aboard ship with his fiancée when the Glass Man had come upon them. Now their broken bodies lay on the deck below, quickly growing cold in the night while their murderer used the owner’s skill and motion to pilot the stolen vessel.

Just as the tiny ship skimmed over the border of the bay into the open ocean, the Glass Man’s compass indicated that what he saw was near by trembling slightly on the surface of its palm. Quickly, the crystalline golem brought the craft to a stop. It climbed down to the main deck and picked up a small wooden chest that was placed against the aft bulwark. It opened the chest and took out a fist sized octahedron of clear crystal with a pinpoint of pale gray light in its heart. Without further ado the unique golem stepped over the bulwark and dove into the sea.

Down, down into the depths the Glass Man plunged, still grasping the compass in one hand and the crystal in the other. The murky waters were utterly dark but for the tiny light within the crystal, which drew the attention of tiny fishes that dashed away again at the sight of the golem’s form. The Glass Man finally came to rest knee-deep in the sediment of the ocean floor and began to trudge in the direction indicated by the compass, perceived by the golem’s senses in spite of the utter darkness.

A journey of only a hundred feet brought the construct to its destination. The Glass Man held the crystal at arm’s length and let it fall, point-first, into the silt. No sooner had the crystal landed in the sediment than the Glass Man crouched and launched itself upward, rising toward the surface with strokes of supernatural potency. As the simulacrum rose through the dark waters, the light within the crystal began to glow steadily brighter and the crystal itself bored into the ocean floor as if drawn downward by an invisible force until its light was hidden by the settling sand. The ocean bottom was dark and quiet again.

The Glass Man broke the surface only moments later and paddled to the drifting yacht. It climbed back up onto the deck and waited there with endless patience, standing stock-still as the chilly sea breeze blew over it and the saltwater dripped from its smooth glass skin into a puddle around its feet. Seconds became minutes, minutes became half an hour, and still the golem waited as the stars twinkled coldly and the tiny ship gently bobbed on the waves.

Finally, almost an hour after the Glass Man resurfaced, a patch of water a stone’s throw off the yacht’s port bow began to churn and froth. Then the surface was speared by a tree-like shape that rose high above the foam, dripping saltwater and sediment, dangling dead seaweed, and joined quickly by two smaller brothers: the masts of an ancient ship, risen from its grave in the briny deep.

Without any outward emotional response the Glass Man climbed back up to the control deck and fired up the engine, then directed the craft on a course that slowly circled the antique vessel. It took in every detail of the ship with its lifeless eyes: the amazingly well-preserved masts and rigging, the tattered rags that had once been sails, the hull that stayed afloat despite the occasional breach on the waterline. As the yacht rounded the ship’s bow, the Glass Man saw the rotted husk that had once been the figurehead, and behind her on the prow metal letters, rusted dark but still readable.

Absolution

As the Glass Man watched the ship, it was watched in turn by many dark shapes that had begun to appear on deck, climbing silently through hatches from below. They gathered along the bulwarks, silhouettes against cold stars, and stared menacingly at the golem as it completed a full circuit around the *Absolution*. The Glass Man stopped the yacht, letting the engine idle, and stood looking defiantly back at the hordes on the ship. The scene was utterly still for a long moment, with no vessel, construct, or horror from the deep moving or making a sound. Then the dark shapes moved toward old stations on deck, and the *Absolution* began to move, steadily picking up speed as it turned toward Ylelon despite its lack of sails or any wind to fill them. The only sound was a rising chorus of laughter from on deck, at once jubilant and malicious.

When the vessel was lost in the darkness, the Glass Man revved the yacht's engine and sped back into the bay on a course of its own.

Chapter I Crime...

The halls and rooms of George Manor were always quiet at night, so much so that on the rare occasions an outsider was present to experience the stillness, they often found it very unsettling. The Mansion was large enough to house hundreds of people, yet no one could remember more than a double-handful living there. Many of the rooms were large enough to contain ordinary houses. The uniformly high ceilings and sparse furnishings only added to the bizarre feeling of indoor agoraphobia fostered by the colossal manse. With the few residents often sleeping during the days and absent for long periods at night, many parts of the Mansion carried an air of near abandonment: cleaned and maintained, but not used.

The one who did the cleaning and maintaining was the one least likely to complain. George's tireless robotic major domo, Sullivan, worked almost constantly, day and night, on the upkeep of the house and grounds. The grounds' immaculately tended vegetation, the well-dusted rooms and the vacuumed carpets were all the results of her diligent efforts. Most of the team took her efforts for granted—quite without malice, for none of them had been residents of the Manor prior to Sullivan's arrival seven years ago, when keeping the property clean had been an extremely time-consuming set of chores divided among the team members.

Still, the sight of the fog-gray, androgynous machine-woman pushing wheelbarrows full of gardening implements along the Wall or simultaneously operating two vacuum cleaners in an unused room in the dead of night could be unsettling even to those who were familiar with her. Sullivan herself was well aware of these occasional reactions. For all her simplistic design and unassuming appearance, Sullivan was one of the single most advanced pieces of technology on the face of the planet. A large part of that was in her artificial intelligence, a singularly complex and masterfully written series of programs that included a psychoanalysis sub-routine. While she was easily the quietest inhabitant of the Mansion, Sullivan was also the most savvy. She observed and recorded every action of the team as a means of monitoring their collective mental health. The natural side-effect of this process was a keen insight into the personality of each other Manor resident. Sullivan knew how unnerving her presence could be for some people, so she often made an effort to remain as inconspicuous as possible in the already tumultuous lives of the Lonely Winds. In fact, she was so adept at keeping a low profile that even long-time Manor residents sometimes forgot she existed. None of this bothered Sullivan in the least: she simply carried on her work without the slightest complaint.

So it was that the robot was dusting the shelves of the endless stacks in the Mansion's enormous Library just before dawn on the same morning that the *Absolution* had risen from its watery grave. One of Sullivan's features was a wireless connection to the Manor's phone lines. When the phone rang, it rang, in a sense, in her head. Now it did so with only the first hints of the sun's light on the horizon, and Sullivan opened a processing pathway and answered without pausing in her work.

"You have reached George Manor. Our regular hours are eight to ten a.m. on second Sundays of every month," she said.

"*Remind me to yell at George for programming you with his sense of humor,*" replied a petulant bass voice.

"Detective King! Good morning!" greeted Sullivan.

"*Hardly,*" muttered the Detective. "*I need to speak with George. Right now.*"

"Of course. Wait just a moment, and I'll patch you through to him."

Sullivan put King on hold, listening to some very up-tempo hip hop. She really did have George's sense of humor.

The line ticked once softly. Sullivan waited patiently through the tinny sound of the antique phone in George's Study ringing. It often took George a while to answer the phone, but as the number of rings passed twenty Sullivan became increasingly dubious. Finally, she broke the connection and spoke again to Detective King.

"I'm sorry, Detective, George doesn't seem to be answering. If you'd care to wait, I can try to find

him myself.”

“All right, but make it quick.”

Sullivan put the Detective on hold again, this time with some soothing violin music. The man was clearly agitated already. There was no need to provoke him any further.

Putting down her feather duster, Sullivan set the line to ring in the Study again and left the Library at a run. She didn't know why George wouldn't answer the phone if he really were in the Study, but it was still the single best place to look for him. George sometimes wandered the Mansion grounds at night, seemingly at random, which meant that if he was not in the Study he could be anywhere on a property covering many acres.

It took Sullivan over a minute to run the length of the east wing hallway to the Foyer, climb the stairs, then turn east again and reach the Study doors. She rapped soundly and stepped back to wait. To her surprise, George answered in a span of seconds.

He looked worse than Sullivan had ever seen him. The thin ring of silver hair that ran around his head was mussed and damp, as though he had slept fitfully through a fever dream. He was wearing his characteristic mismatched clothing--in this case, a white, pink-striped button-down dress shirt and old brown corduroy pants--but they were dingy and wrinkled. This in particular Sullivan found worrisome. For all his eccentricity, George was rarely not neat and tidy.

“What can I do for you, Sullivan?” he asked. To Sullivan's amazement he sounded exhausted.

“I'm sorry, George,” she replied, “Detective King is on the line and he's very insistent, but you weren't answering your phone.”

“I was...dreaming,” said George. “I'll take the call. Thank you, Sullivan.”

He closed the door without another word, leaving Sullivan with little choice but to return to her work. She did, however, store the details of the encounter in her memory and set her subroutines to ponder the situation.

When George left Sullivan at the door to return to his armchair, his walk was that of a man lost. He held one hand against his temple as if to ease the pain of a headache and staggered and stumbled in his tracks. Once he reached his chair, he more fell back into it than sat down and grabbed at the antique telephone on the end table next to his chair as though swatting at a fly.

“Yes?” he barked into the receiver.

There was a brief pause on the line before King spoke. *“George? Is that you?”*

“Who else would it be?” George said coolly.

Detective King hesitated again. *“You...it's just I've never known you to answer the phone without a stupid joke.”*

“I'm in no mood for jokes,” snapped George. “What were you calling about?”

“I've got some details on a case. A freighter coming from Attenz was discovered adrift in the bay a couple of hours ago. Something killed the entire crew.”

George closed his eyes and rubbed his brow. “Do you have any idea what?”

“No, not yet. I've only gotten some initial reports. From the photos I've seen, the whole ship is a slaughterhouse. The harbor patrol is getting ready to lead a team of investigators and forensics on board. They're towing the ship to the north docks.”

“Time frame?”

“No idea. The ship is big, and it's probably going to take us several hours just to search and catalog it, much less gather evidence. I have to go, but I'll keep you informed.”

“Thank you, Detective,” George said and hung up. *It never ends*, he thought sourly. *At least I can let the others sleep for a little while longer.*

Then, in spite of himself, he drifted off to sleep again.

Nails's bare feet hit the mat with a loud *whap*. His attacker came at him again, swinging a short but stout club in a line drive. Nails dodged it easily by weaving outside the arc of the swing and, with a lightning-fast motion, stripped it free of the attacker's grasp.

“You’re still not trying,” the attacker said.

Nails flipped the club over in his hand, caught it by the handle and swung it in a sweeping roundhouse. His attacker surprised him by stepping inside the swing, seizing the hand that held the club, and pivoting on his own axis. Nails was pulled off balance and staggered forward. When he turned around, his assailant was standing, just out of reach, watching him.

“Ok, tell me what I did wrong,” Nails said.

“It’s not a matter of what’s ‘wrong.’ It’s a matter of doing something else that works better,” Master Pana said.

“Then what would work ‘better?’” Nails huffed.

“Nails, as I’ve been telling you for days, you need to focus,” Master Pana said calmly. “You have the flow of a natural warrior. The trouble is, you have a bad habit of relying on ability, rather than skill.”

“I’ve got skill,” Nails protested.

Master Pana smiled. “You certainly do, but you don’t hone it. The greatest warrior alive can still be defeated, especially if he doesn’t make good use of every attribute at his command.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” said Nails. “So, how do I start honing?”

“That’s what I’m here for. We’ll start by working some basic flow drills. You’re very talented, and I think that once you refine that talent into real skill, you’ll be all but unstoppable.”

“I’m already supposed to be unstoppable,” Nails said. “I never met anything that could stand up to me in a fight before I joined this team. Now, everything and its mother has been kicking my butt.”

“That is a symptom of your problem,” Master Pana said with another smile. “Like I said, you rely too much on ability. You told me that the vampire warriors you faced in the high school were not your physical equals?”

“Yeah, not by a stretch,” reflected Nails.

“Yet they nearly defeated you. They were more physically capable than the living people you are used to fighting, and from the stories you tell they were obviously seasoned fighters. It was their superior skill that helped make up the difference. It’s also what allowed me to best you just now. If you hadn’t been so intent on moving blindingly fast, I wouldn’t have been able to outmaneuver you.”

“It was only the one time,” Nails said. “Would you have been able to do it in a serious fight?”

Master Pana frowned. “I admit, probably not. But what if I had? I’m an ordinary man. What if I had been something as strong as you are?”

“Good point,” Nails admitted.

They began again with simple hand coordination drills and moving on to increasingly complex exercises. They had been working for well over half an hour and had barely scratched the surface of all that Master Pana wanted to cover when G.R. appeared, jogging through the Gym doors to the training mat.

“Hey, guys, sorry to interrupt your workout, but George wants everyone to meet in the Situation Room.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s up?” Nails asked.

“I’m not sure,” G.R. said. “He started running through the place a little while ago, insisting we get together. To tell you the truth, he seems kind of agitated.”

“How so?” Master Pana asked with deadly seriousness.

“I dunno, he was just kinda scruffy-looking and impatient. I think he’s just been hitting the brandy a little too hard.”

“We’ll see,” Master Pana said in a tone more curt than any Nails had ever heard him use. “I’m sorry to have to cut your session short, Nails, but this feels important. Have I told you the importance of trusting your instincts in a fight?”

“No,” Nails said as the three men left the Gym, “but I’m looking forward to it.”

While Master Pana and the others were on their way to the Situation Room, Cynthia was sitting on her bed in her room holding her phone, listening to the line ringing through. The “vid-phone” camera on the base of her phone was turned off. Cynthia wasn’t in much of a mood to be seen by anyone, even the

person she was calling.

The line was answered after four rings by a soft female voice. *"Hello?"*

"Angie? This is Cynthia."

"Hey, Cyn! How are you?" Crow asked.

Cynthia giggled nervously. "That's kind of a tough question. The last few days have been pretty weird. I mean *really* weird."

"I know how that can be. How's everyone else?"

"Pretty good. Marc got kind of banged up in a fight the other day, but you know how tough he is."

"No doubt," Crow affirmed. *"After two years of working with that man, I started to wonder if he wouldn't shrug off being hit by lightning. How are the new guys doing?"*

"Nails and G.R.? Ok, I guess. Nails is the new all-star fighter. G.R. just kind of keeps to himself, he doesn't go into the field with us yet. Hey, what does 'G.R.' stand for, anyway?"

"You know, I have no idea," admitted Crow. *"I never really talked to him much."*

"Huh," Cynthia said. Awkward silence followed as both women realized they were avoiding the same subject: Crow's leaving the team.

"So, how are you?" Cynthia finally asked. She wanted to say a thousand things to Crow: that she felt sympathetic for her friend, that she was lonely being new to the team and the only woman in the Mansion, that she had seen things in her mind yesterday at Ylelon University that scared her much more than she had let on to the others.

"You know, I think I'm ok," Crow replied. *"I...I've had a few nightmares about it, but I'm getting over it. I'm starting to feel bad about running out on you guys."*

Cynthia half-smiled. "It's ok. Nobody here really resents you or anything. Well, except Marc, but you know how he is." Her smile faded. "Trust me, I know how things you see in your mind can mess with your head."

They both chuckled at Cynthia's awkward choice of words. Cynthia was just about to ask how Hawk was doing when there was a knock at the door.

"Hang on a sec," Cynthia said and tucked the phone against her shoulder. In a fit of mischief she opened the door telekinetically without moving from the bed, letting it swing aside to reveal George standing on the threshold.

Though Cynthia didn't know it, George had cleaned up considerably since Sullivan had seen him earlier. His clothes were straightened and his hair was combed. There was none of the previous fatigue in his voice and eyes.

"I'm sorry, Cynthia, I didn't mean to interrupt," he said.

"It's ok," Cynthia replied and held the phone back up to her ear. "Hey, Angie, can I call you back later? George is here."

"Good luck!" Crow giggled as they both hung up.

Cynthia hopped up from her bed and trotted to George. "Good morning!" she said brightly as she threw her arms around him in a bear hug.

"Hello there," said George. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm ok, I guess. I was just talking to Angie. I think she's starting to get over what she went through."

"That's very good to know," George said softly. "But I asked how *you* were."

"I'm...I'm dealing."

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Cynthia took a deep breath, as if to steady herself. "I don't really know. It's just...some of the stuff from yesterday really crept me out."

"You are beginning to understand, Cynthia," said George sagely. "Our line of work is one fraught with all manners of peril: assaults against the mind as well as the body. You must be ever cautious, for your sensitivities make you in some ways even more vulnerable than the others."

"Right. Peril, caution, fraught, got it," Cynthia huffed. "I have to be more careful while doing the right thing. No wonder there are so few good guys in the world."

“Not as few as you’d think, but still not many,” George said distantly.

“So, what’s up?” Cynthia asked with a sigh.

“We’re meeting in the Situation Room,” George replied. “It looks like we have another case this evening.”

“Never a dull moment,” Cynthia said wistfully as she and George left her room and headed down the hall.

Soon everyone had gathered in the Situation Room. Nails, Master Pana and G.R. sat in a group on one side of the table, while Sullivan, Marc, Jake, and Will sat on the other. When Cynthia and George arrived, Cynthia took her place next to Sullivan.

George, however, stopped at the entryway and scrutinized the room. He looked over the tables, wall monitors, chairs, even the team as though he were trying to spot a bomb. The team members, as usual, were confused by George’s behavior--though Will did notice a hint of a smirk on Jake’s face.

Presently George began a slow walk toward his chair, still looking around in an almost nervous fashion. When he finally reached his chair he pulled it out from the table and examined the seat, then dropped to his hands and knees and peered under the table. At length he sat in his chair and began to speak as though nothing unusual had happened.

“Detective King called this morning,” he said. “Early today the harbor patrol recovered the *Andrew Dieter*, a freighter returning from Attenz with a large shipment of goods. The ship was adrift, the engines quiet, and strong evidence indicates that the entire crew of fourteen have met with violent ends.”

“Evidence? Like what?” Jake asked.

George took a jump drive from one pocket and pressed a small button on the table’s surface. A panel on the tabletop slid back, revealing a recessed computer console, where George plugged in the jump drive. The team was quite familiar with this ritual: George was activating a large screen that descended into place behind him from a slot in the ceiling. What made Will do a double take and Cynthia cover a smile was the sight of Eric dangling from the screen by a length of string around one webbed foot. The toy duck was dressed in itty bitty cat burglar clothes, complete with a tiny wool cap. When the screen clicked into place, Eric was left dangling within arm’s reach of the back of George’s head, watching the scene intently with his beady black eyes.

George, meanwhile, had called up onscreen one of the images Detective King had sent him, a photo of the *Andrew Dieter*’s helm. The wheel, control panel, and window were covered in dried blood.

“Like that,” George said. “There are signs of violent struggle like this all over the ship. It looks to have been very one-sided. Five crew members’ bodies were found on board: the others are missing.”

“Is there any hint of the motive for this attack?” asked Master Pana.

George nodded. “The *Andrew Dieter* was porting a wide variety of commercial goods. The hold was ransacked and many of the good were taken, particularly vegetables, meat products and liquor. The investigators also noted that the bodies of the crew had been stripped of jewelry and loose change and that the safe had been forced open. Strangely, no paper money was taken from either the safe or the crews’ bodies. The electronics in the hold also appear to be untouched.”

“So somebody was willing to kill for lettuce and small change, but they didn’t take bills or big screen TVs?” Will said and exchanged a glance with Jake.

“Essentially,” George replied.

“Why does Detective King think this is a case for us?” asked Nails. “I mean, this is tragic and all, but it’s just a case of theft and murder, right?”

George pushed a button that clicked off the screen behind him.

“I’ll spare you the gruesome images,” he said, “but these men were killed in particularly vicious ways. One man was dispatched by a blow to the cheekbone that partially crushed his skull, broke his neck, and twisted his head halfway around.”

“So much for sparing us gruesome details,” Jake muttered.

“Nevertheless,” George snapped, “this is not the only indicator that the perpetrators were capable of extreme force. There are hatches that were torn from their hinges, instruments that were completely

smashed and, to the stark disbelief of the investigators, the afore-mentioned safe appears to have been forced open *by hand*.”

“Yikes,” said Jake.

“Wow. Could *you* do that?” G.R. asked Nails.

“The safe thing?” Nails said. “Sure. No problem.”

“So whatever did this is as strong as Nails?” whimpered Cynthia.

“Not necessarily,” George said. “There were numerous stress points--hand prints--around the safe in different sizes, indicating that more than one individual was involved.”

“So it only takes a few of these things to tear open a safe with their bare hands,” groaned Jake.

“Do we have any theories about what we’re facing?” Will queried.

“Not yet,” frowned George. “The handprints suggest humanoids of some sort, but we know little beyond that.”

“What’s our course of action?” asked Jake. Eric began to swing his wings back and forth, causing him to sway like a pendulum ever closer to the back of George’s head.

“This ship is currently in quarantine,” George replied. “After the initial investigation, the administration is awaiting the coroner’s reports and the collation of other data before proceeding. As of now, the ship remains under guard at the Northern Bay docks.”

“Let me guess,” said Jake wryly, “our job will be to sneak past the guards, board the ship, gather information even though most of the evidence has been removed, and disembark without being arrested and/or shot.”

“Plus, you’ll be working in the dark!” George grinned.

“All right,” sighed Will. “Everyone knows the drill. Tools, weapons, armor, clothing. Jake, crime scene kits and your sensors. Cynthia, we’ll need to know anything you can tell us while we’re there. This is going to be deep undercover, people, so our priority is to not be caught.”

“I can get us past the guards. If we’re going under cover of darkness, I can air-drop the team right on deck,” Nails offered.

“Do I get to go?” blurted G.R..

“No, we don’t want Nails to throw his back out carrying you,” Marc sneered.

“Get stuffed!” G.R. almost shouted.

“This will be a delicate operation, George-Richard, and hardly an appropriate start to your field career,” said George.

“‘George-Richard’?!” Marc exclaimed and burst into raucous laughter. G.R. turned beet red.

“You have the same name as him?” asked Cynthia incredulously. G.R. turned even redder.

“‘George’ is a fine thing to call oneself,” Master Pana said thoughtfully. “‘Worker of the earth.’ A strong name. A humble name.”

“A goofy name!” Marc wheezed out between guffaws.

“My name is ‘Fierce,’ damn it!” spat G.R..

“Getting back to the task at hand,” Will said. “Everyone meet in the Foyer in an hour. We’ll take inventory and make sure we have everything we need. What time should we leave tonight?”

“Say, around seven,” George replied. “That will give you darkness to work with, without being too late.”

“Good call,” Will affirmed. “Let’s go to work, folks.”

Eric swung up behind George and wrapped his wings around the old man’s head, covering his eyes. “Quack, quack!” he said. George yelped, leaped up from his chair and out of Eric’s grasp and skittered out of the room.

Eric continued to hang from the screen, looking after George. Presently Jake rose from his chair, went to Eric, freed him, set him on the table and gave his wing a high five.

“Way to go. That was hilarious.”

The equipment check went smoothly, with plenty of provisions laid out for a variety of contingencies. Once George and Will pronounced the gear chosen to be sufficient, George gave the team

the afternoon off to relax. Jake added his armor and some assault rifles to the supplies, figuring they would be needed against whatever was killing men with single blows and tearing hatch doors off their hinges.

The rest of the afternoon and early evening was filled by the team members in their preferred ways as they tried to distract themselves from the specter of what the evening undoubtedly held for them. Nails went back to training with Master Pana. Will and Cynthia put in some practice time on the firing range in the Workshop. Marc spent a while beating on his punching bag before taking a power nap, while Jake tinkered fitfully with some on the new sensory equipment in his armor. George disappeared into his Study at a run with Eric hot on his heels.

And Sullivan watched closely and remembered everything she saw.

Roundabout 6:45 the team gathered in the Foyer and began to prepare. Sullivan and Master Pana helped the active members divvy up the equipment to carry.

At three before seven George appeared on the balcony, dressed for no apparent reason in a platypus costume. He came running down the steps with an awkward flopping of his feet. Will buried his face in his hands at the sight, Jake chuckled and Cynthia giggled.

“All right, final check, people,” George said with a completely straight face. “This could be anything from simple reconnaissance to out-and-out siege combat. Be on your guard at all times and remember you must avoid the posted constabulary as well.”

“You know what? Let’s just go,” Will groaned as he shouldered a pack of first-aid supplies and marched out the front doors. Marc and Jake exchanged glances, shrugged, and followed with their own gear.

“They used to think it was funny,” George said as he took off the head of his costume. Cynthia thought she heard a hint of real sadness in his voice. She put on her backpack, jogged to George and gave him a hug before hurrying after the others.

“How come *he* gets a hug?” grumbled G.R..

“He looks better than you in a platypus suit,” Nails quipped as he scooped the remaining gear into his arms and trotted after the others.

“How much longer do I have to wait before I can go with them?” G.R. whined.

“You can go when you are ready, G.R.,” George said calmly.

“Do not lose heart,” Master Pana said in response to G.R.’s frustrated huff. “You are learning very quickly and making tremendous progress with your health. I’m sure it will only be a matter of time before you can work with the others.”

“Yeah, whatever,” G.R. groaned. “I’m gonna go play some Ultimate Tournament IV. Might as well have some fun before I have to sit and watch everyone else have all the *real* fun.” He stormed up the steps and out of sight down the hall.

“That man has a lot of anger in him,” Sullivan observed.

“Yes, and his tantrums are even beginning to get *my* goat,” said George.

Master Pana smiled. “Patience, Worker of the Land. G.R. has much potential, but he needs a change to develop both self-confidence and humility. Do you have any idea what the team will be facing?”

“None whatsoever.” George scowled. “Detective King helped me acquire blueprints for the ship, but beyond that the team will be going in blind.”

“I’m sure they will be fine, George. These young people are rare talents, every one of them,” said Master Pana.

“If only that were enough on its own,” George lamented as he led Master Pana and Sullivan up the stairs.

The team arrived at the north docks just after 8 o’clock. They met in the shadow of a large warehouse and made their way as stealthily as possible to the pier where the *Andrew Dieter* was moored. Police tape was webbed back and forth across the only gangway in place. Strangely, there were no guards

visible on or near the ship. The dark night would help to conceal the team's activities aboard ship, but it would also make it difficult to detect any sentries that might be patrolling the vessel.

"Ok, who's first?" Nails asked as the Winds gazed up at the immense black silhouette of the ship.

"I am," whispered Will. "I'll scout out the top deck while you come back for Marc. If anything is wrong I'll signal you."

"Good plan. Alley-ooop!" Nails said as he grasped both of Will's wrists and rose into the air. He flew in a high arc above the docks and the ship, finally angling down toward the side railing on the far side of the vessel. Will and Nails could not see the deck until they had almost reached it. They waited quietly for a moment after setting down and looked around to make sure there was no one else nearby. The night was still and silent, the only sound the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull.

"Ok, we're clear. Get Marc," said Will.

"*How does it look, Will?*" George asked.

"Clean so far, I'm going to scout ahead until the others get here."

"*You should wait for them,*" Master Pana suggested.

"I can make sure this deck is safe."

"*Stay put, Will,*" commanded George. "*Whatever did this killed a man with a single blow to the face. You need backup before you go any further.*"

"Fine," Will sighed in resignation. He waited as Nails brought the others to join him one by one.

"All right, Nails up front wherever we go," he said. "Jake, Cynthia, I want you two behind Nails with your sensors working. The rest of us are at the ready in back."

"Where do we start?" Nails asked.

"*There were three bodies left on the bridge, two in the mess. You should begin with one of those places,*" George said.

"Mess first," said Will.

George gave the team directions to the mess hall. They made their way through a nearby hatch and into the superstructure. Down stairs and through halls they went until they came to the mess. Whatever power plant kept the lights on was still working, as the aged fluorescent settings in the ceiling cast a ghastly pall of illumination upon the stark interior.

Nails stopped at the entryway to the mess and leaned inside. Off to his right was a bodyline of water-resistant tape around a telltale dark brown stain. Nails gingerly stepped around the line and led the way into the room.

"What happened here?" Jake exclaimed as he looked over the ransacked room.

Cynthia took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. "They found them here. They were searching the ship and found these two here eating..."

"There's more than one?" Marc asked.

"You know what did this?" inquired Jake as the same time.

"No," Cynthia replied sadly. "I just have a sort of feeling what they were thinking. They were confused. This ship was very strange to them, and they were lost..." she trailed off.

"Can you tell us where they are now?" Will asked quickly.

"I told you I don't know!" Cynthia snapped. "I just--there's a kind of a...it's a leftover sense. Of what they were thinking. That's all."

"Why'd they kill these poor saps, then?" asked Marc.

Cynthia looked from the bodyline in the middle of the room to the one by the door. "This one was just in the way. That one tried to run."

Marc frowned and said nothing.

"Jake?" Will asked.

"Not much special here," Jake replied without looking up from the Osborn Eye. "There's the usual chemical traces in here you'd expect on a ship. I'd have to go over the room inch by inch to find anything."

"All right, on to the bridge," Will said.

As the others were leaving the room something caught Cynthia's eye. It was the faintest trace of

the outline of a boot print in sand and salt. Cynthia knelt to look closer at it, unconsciously reaching for it with one hand.

“*Cynthia! Remember you’re in a crime scene,*” George chided.

“Sorry,” Cynthia whimpered and trotted after the others.

Slowly the team made their way to the bridge. The superstructure groaned now and then as the ship rocked gently on the bay, the only other sound beyond the team’s footsteps on the deck. The bridge was less dark than the rest of the ship; illuminated by moonlight, starlight, and the lights of the city beyond the docks as well as the standard lighting.

There were three more bodylines on the deck: one by the wheel, one at the radio station and one in the middle of the room. Brown stains marked spots around the bodylines, on the wheel, the chair, and even on the lower frame of the window in front of the wheels.

“Holy crap,” Jake muttered.

“You said it,” growled Marc. “These things must be vicious.”

“Anything yet?” Will asked.

“I’ll let you know.” Jake sounded slightly annoyed.

Nails and Marc walked to the front of the view port and gazed out over the bay. “Wow. Nice view,” Nails said.

Jake suddenly sighed in frustration. “This is a dead end. I don’t see what we’re going to find that the forensics teams didn’t without totally scouring the place and I don’t have the equipment for that.”

Cynthia didn’t seem to hear him. She was fixated on the nearest control panel, staring at one corner of it with her empty, emotionless gaze.

“*Cynthia?*” asked George as she inched closer to the panel. “*What do you see?*”

“There’s something here,” Cynthia replied distantly as she reached out toward the control panel.

“*Cynthia, don’t touch any--*” Master Pana warned, but it was too late.

Cynthia’s hand touched the corner and ran along the underside, touching something the investigators had missed. A feeling like an electric shock ran through her mind. She staggered and fell backwards onto the deck as her thoughts became jumbled all at once with images of a life that was not her own.

“*Cynthia!*” George shouted.

“She did it again, didn’t she?” asked Jake. Will only hefted a sigh as he moved to Cynthia’s side.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

A single tear ran down Cynthia’s cheek as she looked at Will. She said only one thing, in a sorrowful voice.

“They are so glad to be free.”

Chapter II ...and Punishment

The waves lashed violently at the prow of the Absolution as she closed in on her prey. A favorable headwind filled the sails. The over-loaded merchant ship could do nothing to prevent the great warship from overtaking her.

The sailor licked his lips and gripped his belaying pin more tightly. He could have used blades or pistols like his shipmates, but he had always found something satisfying in the feel of a skull cracking under the weight of the makeshift club. Taking loot was the most enjoyable part of his life, but it wasn't the only one.

The sailing master was bellowing orders somewhere nearby. Even with the ship moving very slowly the boarding process was complicated, but it didn't matter. This crew worked well together and always had. In eight years the men of the Absolution had never encountered anything they couldn't handle.

The merchant vessel crested a small wave. The helmsman was just beginning to maneuver to run alongside her when the lookout began to scream incomprehensibly. The eyes of every hand instinctively turned upward, then ran back to the skyline after seeing the lookout's frantic gestures. It took even the sailor's practiced eye several moments to find what he was indicating. Scattered around the horizon were a number of tiny, faint patches of gray against the blue sky--other ships approaching from every direction. The Absolution had run into a trap.

Immediately the first mate was bellowing orders to disengage. In a rush the supposedly helpless merchant ship's decks were swarming with riflemen, soldiers who had been poised to surprise the Absolution's crew. Some of them paced the deck in frustration at seeing their fight turning away, while a few of them took aim with their muskets and fired. Shots tore chunks of wood out of the bulwarks and masts. One man hit the deck with a musket ball in his skull.

The sailing master was now screaming for the canons to be made ready, but it was a futile gesture. They were surrounded, with almost no hope of escaping. Crack crew or not, there was almost no chance of them winning a fight against the odds they faced.

The sailor clenched his belaying pin even more tightly. They wouldn't get him without a fight.

"Are you ok, Cynthia?" Jake asked.

"I'm fine," Cynthia replied as Will helped her to her feet. "It was just a lot to take in at once."

Will scowled. "What happened?"

Cynthia took something from the corner of the control panel and handed it to Will: a tiny black mass of shapeless material. "I touched this. It's part of one of their clothing."

"It's soaked," Will grouched. "These things came out of the sea?"

"Something like that." Cynthia turned and headed for the hatch. "We won't find anything else of value here."

"How do you know that?" asked Marc.

"They didn't, either."

"So, the information you got is helpful?" Jake asked enthusiastically.

A tear began to form in Cynthia's eye. "Only some of it."

The onlookers roared their approval as the judge passed sentence. Almost a third of the Absolution's crew had been killed or mortally wounded when the warships had caught up with her. The sailor would have preferred to die fighting, but some coward had struck him from behind and put him out cold.

Now he stood with his surviving shipmates, chained in several rows before the judge in this immense courtroom. The summer heat was oppressive, yet it did not lessen the fervor of the crowd.

The judge sentenced the captain first, condemning him to a miserable wasting death locked in a gibbet hanging high above the bay. The captain himself remained stoically defiant. For the first time in

years, the sailor did not envy his leader.

That was only because he didn't know what was coming...

“George, can you get us a boat?” Cynthia asked suddenly as the team gathered on a rampart outside the bridge.

“Very possibly. What do you have in mind?”

“Just anything that will get us into the open ocean,” Cynthia replied. “I can take us to a good place to meet them where there won't be any people around.”

“Yeah, hey, hold on a second,” Marc said. “What the hell is going on here?”

“It's hard to explain,” replied Cynthia, “I got a *lot* of info from that piece of cloth. It's like reading every single book in George's Library in three seconds, then trying to explain what you just read.”

“Can you sum up and give us some idea of what we're dealing with?” asked Jake.

“I'd rather not talk too much about it,” Cynthia said.

“*Cynthia, we need to have some idea--*” George began.

“I said I don't want to talk about it!” the redhead snapped. “I'll make sure we're ready, just...get us a boat.”

“Very well,” George relented. He didn't sound happy.

“We need to get ready,” Cynthia told the others. “I think we're going to need everything we brought.”

“What's the plan?” Jake asked.

Cynthia turned to look out over the moonlit sea. “We're going to meet them, before they can do anything worse.”

“Poetic justice,” the judge had said.

The Absolution had been one of the proudest ships in the fleet during the last war with Attenz, serving with distinction as the larger country across the mountains fought tooth and nail for three long years to conquer the tiny, ore-wealthy Ylelon.

Then the war had ended and the order came: the Absolution would be decommissioned to save costs as the devastated desert country struggled to rebuild itself. The crew was furious. After all their efforts, how were they to be repaid? To be sent back to land, to work to death in the mines? Or perhaps to beg in the streets?

Nay. The Absolution had served them well and had been their home. It would continue to do so. If the crew's country would not recognize what they had given, then a mighty warship and a healthy portion of the goods traveling to and from the city would be their reward. In one fell stroke the Absolution and her crew went from being one of the gems of Ylelon's navy to the bane of its existence. For seven long years the stolen warship menaced the seas around Ylelon and Attenz, deftly avoiding any efforts by the local navies to capture it. It was only the desperate ruse using the merchant ship, spurred by public outrage and made possible by very careful timing and more than a little luck, that ended the vessel's reign of terror.

The captain was sentenced to a miserable death, but the rest of the crew would be subject to the judge's “poetic justice.” If they wanted the Absolution so badly, they could keep it. The ship would become a prison hulk, permanently anchored in the harbor with the crew confined within for the remainder of their natural lives.

As the prisoners were led away it was difficult to tell which group's uproar was louder: the spectator's, or the crew's.

“I think I'm feeling a little better,” Cynthia whispered. She was standing with Will at the prow of a rented yacht as it pattered out into the bay. It had taken George numerous calls and a small fortune in “insurance” to find someone willing to loan out a ship large enough for the team's needs on short notice, in the middle of the night, with no questions asked. In the end it was time and money well-spent and Jake now guided the pleasure craft at cruising speed out to sea, adjusting course as Cynthia signaled from the

prow.

“Good,” Will said, “what can you tell me?”

Cynthia signaled Jake to turn slightly to port. “Not a lot. I know that George was right about how strong these things are. We’re going to want all those big guns and Jake’s armor. Nails might want to use some dynamite, too.”

“That doesn’t really help. Can’t you just tell us what it is we’re dealing with?”

“It’s not that simple!” Cynthia huffed. “What I do isn’t...it’s not like reading a book.” She paused and looked at the Jakecam™ on Will’s shoulder, then at her own.

“Sorry, people, but this is easier to talk about without an audience.”

“*That’s quit all right, Cynthia,*” George said knowingly just before she switched off her camera. After only a moment’s hesitation, Will did the same.

“When I read something, I get everything that’s in it at once,” Cynthia began. “It’s not just information, I get memories, feelings, sensations...I know exactly what a person was thinking about the situation they were in.”

“What did you get from that scrap?” prompted Will.

“Lots of things.” Cynthia was quiet for a moment. “These were bad people. They caused a lot of pain in their time and they died pretty horribly. The moment I touched that nasty little cloth, I got all of it, years and years of blood and misery, all at the same time.”

“I...see,” Will said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pushed you. I didn’t realize how traumatic it was for you.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

Will peaked his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“It’s just...I-I...” Cynthia trailed off and looked away. “I saw what happened,” she whispered.

“Where? On the freighter?”

“In the school.” When Cynthia looked back at Will, his eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

“When we were fighting that vampire cult and I went looking for their leader, I found the room where Tina--”

Will looked away.

“I know that George was there,” continued Cynthia, “I know he saved you and you woke up and saw him--”

“What did you see?” Will exclaimed as he grabbed Cynthia by her shoulders. “Why was he there? Why did he save me and not her?!”

“Will, you’re hurting me!” Cynthia gasped. Will let her go and pulled away, embarrassed.

“I...I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. I didn’t know how to tell you, but I thought I should.” Cynthia signaled Jake to slow their speed slightly. “I don’t think George knows, I just wanted to tell you. I think I kind of understand why you’re always so short with him.”

“Do you know what happened?” Will asked with desperate longing. “How was he there when we left him at the Mansion? Why didn’t he save Tina? *How did he do all those terrible things?*”

Cynthia only shook her head sadly.

A few minutes later she signaled for Jake to stop. The ship was slowed and came to a rest bobbing gently on the waves. The night was utterly silent. The stars and moons above and the ship itself were the only lights in the darkness. The water was black as obsidian. Marc and Nails came at a jog from where they had been lounging at the stern to join Cynthia and Will.

“Is this it? Are they here?” Marc asked as though he expected a fight to start at any instant.

“No, but they will be,” replied Cynthia. “This is a course that they liked. They don’t understand what’s happened to them, but they know they should hide, so they’ve been out at sea all day and will come this way soon.”

“You know, as cute as you are, the cryptic talk is getting really old,” Nails quipped.

“Yeah, I agree,” said Cynthia.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow again...

At first, the sailor had thought himself lucky not to share his captain's death sentence, but when he was led at gun point, in chains, aboard the ship he had lived on as a free man and shown the shoddy five-by-five cell where he was to spend the rest of his life, he began to have his doubts. Those doubts became certainty as days bled into months and the endless days of sitting in the cramped cell became a burden that made the crew long for death.

Some of them got it. Disease claimed a crew member here and there, while others succumbed to the ravages of Ylelon's fierce summer heat and the chills of the ocean in winter. The guards cared nothing for the prisoners and often neglected to feed them for days at a time. By their eighth year of imprisonment only a fraction of the original crew still lingered, broken and withered shadows of their former selves.

It was in the spring of that eighth year that a storm struck the harbor. It was no more severe than a dozen other tropical storms that had occurred during the last eight seasons, but the Absolution had been neglected in that time and her beams and seals were no longer as sound as they had once been. A small breach in the hull below the waterline became a large breach as the storm hammered the disgraced warship. Wild currents snapped the anchor line and dragged the vessel ever farther from shore. Already listing dangerously to starboard, the Absolution began to sink before she was even out of sight of land, gradually filling each cell with water, to the mingled horror and relief of the prisoners trapped within.

The team waited, armed and ready, on the yacht's deck. Jake had turned off the lights, leaving the ship an invisible speck in the endless black ocean. Even with the light of the two moons, the team members could barely see each other in the gloom.

"How much longer are we gonna have to wait?" Marc growled after several minutes of silence.

"They're coming," Cynthia whispered as she pointed off to port. When the others looked, they saw the hint of a great black silhouette passing before the stars along the horizon.

"Can they see us?" asked Will. Cynthia shook her head. Still, the fighters held their weapons at the ready. Jake found himself wishing he'd put his armor on when he'd had the chance.

"Scouting time!" Nails chuckled and began to rise from the deck.

"*Slow down there, killer,*" George said sardonically from Nails' Jackecam™, which reminded Will and Cynthia to turn their own cameras back on. "*We have no idea what you're dealing with yet.*"

"Right, which is why I'm taking a look," Nails said. "Wait right here, I'll be back."

"*As much as I hate to use a cliché, do not forget what I have taught you,*" Master Pana advised as Nails soared above the waves and toward the dark ship.

"Yeah, no problem," Nails muttered.

The ship came into better view under the light of the two moons as Nails drew closer. The drenched, rotted tatters that were all that remained of her sails waved forlornly in the still air, yet she was making good speed toward the bay. Nails could just make out movement on the deck, black silhouettes clustered together on the foredeck. As he drew closer, a disturbing sound reached his ears: a rhythmic chanting sung with voices as empty and unforgiving as a desert wind, in lyrics of an archaic dialect that Nails only partially understood. Though they seemed to be part of a jolly song, there was a malice in the voices that made Nails falter slightly in his course.

"Is that a sea shanty?" he wondered aloud. Wisely he circled wide around the ship and approached from abaft. As he drifted closer to the poop deck he could see unlit lanterns swaying from rotted ornamental carvings and at the fore of the deck, the helmsman.

The man was wrapped in the decrepit remains of a filthy, threadbare shirt and pantaloons. Here and there gaped open patches in his flesh where Nails could see glints of moonlight on bare bone. The helmsman was swaying slightly in time to the song and as Nails drew closer he could hear the man singing under his breath.

"*Don't try it, Nails,*" George whispered.

"We have to tackle this thing sometime," Nails retorted. He drifted right up behind the helmsman, set down gently on the deck, and said, "Please stop your vehicle and present your license and

registration.”

The helmsman whirled around and Nails felt a pang of revulsion. The creature had no eyes, only empty pits. Shriveled lips curled back in a snarl to reveal cracked, filthy teeth. The thing drew a rusty, jagged cutlass from its side and lunged at Nails with a disemboweling strike.

These guys are quick, Nails thought as he hopped out of the sword’s path and struck back with a punch to the temple that would have knocked out the toughest street fighter in the world. The helmsman’s head snapped sharply to the right, then turned quickly back around toward Nails. Without missing a beat he swung his sword again, this time in a line drive.

“Oh boy,” Nails said as he back-flipped above and out of the way of the strike. He landed halfway back along the deck. Only then did he realize the singing had stopped: the sound of half-rotted and waterlogged boots clomping across the deck below had taken its place.

“I told you so,” George said.

“Yeah, yeah,” moaned Nails. A handful, then a dozen, then a score of walking corpses climbed the stairs from the lower decks and lined up facing him on the poop deck. All of them were shriveled and rotted and not one of them had eyes. They growled and made threats in guttural voices that had scarcely been used in hundreds of years and brandished decrepit but lethal-looking weapons.

“You know what the worst part about this is?” said Nails.

“What would that be?” George asked humorlessly.

“I can’t think of anything clever to say,” Nails lamented.

One of the sailors lunged at him, swinging a belaying pin. Nails slapped the attack aside and retaliated with a solid blow to the sternum that hurled his enemy backward over his compatriot’s heads. They immediately began to advance on Nails, who had to dodge a slashing cutlass, then a long dagger. He was about to strike back when a pistol shot rang out. A sharp, burning pain pierced his side as a bullet lodged in his body. The distraction put him off-guard enough for a cutlass-wielder to slash him across the chest right before a crude club smacked him over the head.

“Oh hell!” Nails exclaimed as two of the crew drew back their fists in tandem and punched.

The force of the impact hurled Nails clear of the deck and sent him plunging into the sea. Even over the gurgle of water in his ears he could hear the mocking, mirthless laughter of the crew. When he burst through the surface in a spray of foam a moment later, the ship was already disappearing into the darkness.

“Now might be a good time to reevaluate your strategy, Nails,” George said wryly.

“Tell me about it!” the angel said. “Hey, I didn’t know these little cameras were waterproof.”

“Jake is quite clever.”

“Yeah, I get that. What do you think I should do?”

“While the one-man boarding party carries a species of visceral appeal, the approach of “attack first, think later” doesn’t appear to have been particularly effective. Perhaps you should rejoin your teammates. You remember, the ones with the guns?”

“All right, all right,” Nails moaned. He winced as he dug his fingers into the pistol wound and extracted the rusty, distorted globe of the bullet that he’d been shot with. He grimaced, stuffed the ancient missile into a pocket and flew away.

Jake guided Nails back to the yacht with a flashlight at George’s behest and the bruiser alighted on the deck with a pensive expression on his face. His wounds were already healing, but his shirt, hanging open in a gash from the sword and sporting a bullet hole, told a partial tale of what had happened.

“We heard the shot,” said Will. “What did you see?”

Nails paused before beginning. “There are a lot of them. They’re on a big ol’ sailing ship, like in the movies.”

“What are they?” asked Jake.

“Dead,” Nails replied. “Dead and...decomposed. Like they’ve been at the bottom of the sea for a long time. That’s how the ship looks, too.”

“How are they sailing? There’s no wind,” Will observed.

"They don't really seem to care," Nails said absently.

"Ok, right," Jake said. "George, should that scare me as much as it does?"

"More, probably."

"Why? What are we missing?" asked Cynthia.

"I'm glad you asked. Jake is drawing a conclusion based on available observations."

"...which are WHAT?! Marc growled when George did not elaborate.

"Look, it's simple," Jake said. "These things are in an antique vessel, right? They're sailing without a headwind," he pointed at the hole in Nails' shirt, "using firearms, and they look like they've been rotting on the sea floor."

"They *were* on the sea floor," Cynthia whispered.

Jake gave a small nod. "If these things really are from a previous era, then this is more than just your everyday case of walking cadavers with severe personality flaws."

Understanding dawned on Will's face. "They shot Nails with a gun that has been on the ocean bottom for hundreds of years."

Jake nodded again. "These aren't your usual undead. They've come back and they brought their gear."

Nails remembered the bullet in his pocket, took it out and tossed it to Jake.

"See what I mean?" he asked as he held the rusted lump up between his thumb and forefinger. "No self-respecting firearm would throw this slug."

"So what the hell does *that* mean?" growled Marc.

"You're suggesting something is empowering these things?" Will said in a half-statement, half-question.

"Someone, or something," replied Jake conspiratorially. "Lately somebody has been flexing a lot of magical muscle. We've seen spell-casting undead in underground bunkers, little political booby-trap building gremlin things, and wizards with zero fashion sense in some kind of cold war with a big-ass dragon, all in the last few weeks. That's a lot of weirdness per mile, even for us."

"So maybe whoever's been building the summoning chambers created these things," Will posed. "Works some dark magic, animates the dead and gives them a ship and equipment that work when they really shouldn't. But how did they find the ship if it was on the sea bottom?"

"A good divination spell would do it," George said. *"If the vessel sank in its day and was buried in sediment, it would have been quite well preserved, along with the remains of the crew. A mage powerful enough to raise an entire ship's crew in undeath and set them upon the world would likely have little difficulty divining the location of the ship in the first place."*

"But why?" Cynthia said, as much to herself as anyone else. "What's the point in getting a bunch of dead sailors to attack a cargo ship?"

"What's the point of any of it?" Jake asked calmly. "*None* of this makes any sense. Why did whomever is responsible for all of this excavate a huge pit under an empty house just to summon a handful of booby-trap creatures? It's too bizarre for words."

"Jake's right. We'll deal with the current problem first and try to rationalize the insanity of our lives later," said Will.

"Easier said than done," Nails muttered as he wrung out the dripping fistfuls of his tattered shirt. "We seriously do not want to take these things on in a frontal assault."

"First we have to figure out how to navigate and follow them without any lights," Jake said.

"What? Why no lights?" snapped Marc.

"If they have working guns," Jake explained, "they may also have working *cannons*."

"Oh," Marc said in an uncharacteristically small voice.

"Do we have any tow lines?" asked Nails. "I can tie a line around my waist and scout ahead. You'll know which way to steer by where the line goes."

"Crude, but potentially effective," Jake mused. "Lead the way, great one."

Nails' suggestion turned out to be fairly workable. He was careful to leave slack on the line as he

hovered in the blackness, watching and listening for the *Absolution*. It was only a few minutes of steady travel along the dead ship's last known course before Nails could hear the crew's singing again. He also caught sight of lights arranged in a neat grid in the distance.

Weird, he thought. *I didn't realize we were so close to the city already.*

He descended until he could just make out the silhouette of the ship herself. She was on a direct course for the distant lights.

"They don't seem terribly upset about having been boarded, do they?" quipped Nails.

"You could try asking them."

"All right, all right," Nails groaned. "Now that we've found them, what should we do?"

"If you can arrest their progress somehow, they may be easier to deal with," Master Pana suggested.

"How? They're sailing without any wind!"

"True, but they still need to be able to steer."

Nails immediately descended to sea level. Just ahead he could make out the silhouette of the *Absolution's* stern and hear the waves against her hull. In the distance behind him Nails could hear the yacht's engine and he hoped that the *Absolution's* crew couldn't hear it.

The line was taut around his waist as he moved closer to the stern, where he could make out the uppermost part of the rudder as the waves lashed around it. Gently at first, Nails reached out and touched it. The wood was solid and sturdy, but very old. It crumpled and cracked like balsa when Nails crushed it in his hands. In seconds he had reduced it to several chunks of flotsam drifting slowly away.

"That should do it," Nails heard George tell the others through the Jakecam™ network. *"They can no longer maneuver, but they're still moving. It won't take them long to discover that something has happened again."*

"You guys get as close as you can and look for a way to climb aboard," Nails said as he unfastened the towline. "I'm going to try sneaking on board this time and look for the simple solution to our problem."

"What would that be?" Will asked with an uneasy tone after a moment of silence.

Nails smiled to himself. "Like Jake said, if these guys have guns, they may have cannons. If they have cannons, then they might have a convenient room full of barrels of gunpowder, like in the movies. Also, a cage holding a gorgeous maiden wearing a low-cut dress. Not that I'm thinking about that."

"All right, go for it, Nails, just be careful," Will said.

"You got it."

Nails began by soaring above the ship again to get a bird's-eye view of the top deck. Below him the dead men swarmed about, singing their long-lost sea shanties and bustling about their countless maritime chores. They worked with the instinctive precision of men long familiar with their tasks--even though many of those tasks now seemed meaningless, like that of the small team working to realign sails that were merely limp shreds of cloth.

Nails looped downward to hover against the port side. He soon found a breach in the hull large enough to fit through and climbed into the cramped and dark confines of the second deck. Though his eyes did not need to adjust to the light change, it was very gloomy, enough so that Nails took a moment to get his bearings.

Though the ship herself was largely intact, it showed that it had spent the last few hundred years at the bottom of the sea. The decks and bulkheads were weathered and damp, sediment lodged in every nook and cranny. The great beams holding the vessel together creaked ominously in time to the hull's rocking on the waves, yet they stood fast and strong. Nails didn't know much about shipbuilding, but he knew enough to be impressed with the builders of this ship that made her so well as to be able to rise nearly whole from internment in the ocean floor, magic or not.

He began to walk as stealthily as possible across the deck. There were few stores of any kind and the arrangement of the ship seemed to have been set for rows of small cells and cages. Nails supposed the cruelly small cells were meant for prisoners, but he couldn't imagine why even a warship would need

room for so many captives. He also noted with some amazement that quite a few of the cells appeared to have been breached violently, with doors torn from their hinges, bars bent and twisted outward and bulkheads broken through.

As Nails pondered this morbid sight something else caught his eye: a shaft of light rising from the deck that came into view as he stepped around a bulkhead. Coming closer, Nails saw that the hole the light was shining through was a much newer wound than the other ones the *Absolution* sported. It was round and about as large across as Nails' palm, with edges freshly cut through the planks of the deck as though a perfectly sharp and precise drill had bored through it. The light shining up from below was of a pale gray hue. As Nails peered down through the hole he could see that the illumination was shining up through at least two more decks.

"Bingo!" he said to himself and began to jog back the way he'd come toward a flight of steps leading down that he had seen earlier, unaware that a dead face with empty eye sockets was watching him through a breach in the deck above.

"How is Nails doing?" Will whispered. The *Absolution's* crew had quickly noticed their reduction in steering ability and slowed to a crawl. Jake had turned off the engine to avoid being heard and was attempting to come alongside the galleon on momentum alone-- a dangerous and difficult maneuver under the best circumstances, much less at night and without proper lights.

"*He seems to have found something of note in the lower decks,*" George whispered back. "*What are you planning, Will?*"

"We stand by as support for Nails," Will replied. "If he finds his powder kegs, we take off as soon as he gives the signal. If he runs into trouble, we give him covering fire."

Will took Jake's place at the helm soon after so Jake could don his armor, while Marc and Cynthia watched the *Absolution* like hawks. They could hear the crew working, apparently trying to build a makeshift rudder that would at least allow them to make it to a safe harbor for more permanent repairs. Will intended to make certain that was a safe harbor they would never reach.

When Jake was finished suiting up, Will came to join the others on the foredeck. The two craft were drifting more or less side by side. The Winds waited and hoped that none of the *Absolution's* crew decided to take more than a casual look over the port side.

It only took Nails a few minutes to find his way down to the deck the strange light was coming from. Nails thought he was very near the bottom of the ship (was there some special word for the bottom of a ship? Bilge or something, right?) but that thought was pushed aside as he stepped down from the previous deck and into the sickly gray light.

It was emanating from a fist-sized crystal octahedron that hovered in midair directly beneath the last hole in the decks. The crystal shone brightly from within and cast its light in a gray pall over everything nearby. Nails approached it, reached out his hand and pulled it back at the last moment.

"*Congratulations, you've discovered a radioactive D8,*" G.R. said.

"Keep your voice down!" Nails snapped. "What do you think, George? This has gotta be the source of all this."

"*Almost certainly. We have no idea what this object is, so we should be extremely careful how--*"

Nails plucked the crystal from the air and hurled it against the nearest bulkhead. It shattered into a half-dozen fragments like fine china, the light within quickly fading to leave only jagged, dirty white shards.

George smacked his palm against his forehead.

"That seemed to work," Nails chuckled as he clapped his hands together. "Now I just--"

He spun around at a sharp clicking sound from behind and found himself staring into the barrel of a flintlock pistol a split-second before the weapon was fired and the bullet lodged in his right eye.

Chapter III Life at Sea

The shot rang out through the ragged hull of the *Absolution* and into the night, startling the crews of both ships. While the Lonely Winds held stock-still for fear of detection, the *Absolution's* crew raised their voices in a cry of outrage and began to storm across deck seeking the source of the third interruption of their evening.

“What’s happening?” Will whispered into his Jakecam™.

“*One of the dead found Nails and attacked him!*” G.R. blurted.

“*You cover’s blown. You should retreat and regroup,*” said George.

“We can’t keep playing cat and mouse, George,” retorted Jake. “We’ve got to hit them now, before they know what’s happening.”

“How do you intend to--” Will began. His words died as Marc threw one arm around Jake’s shoulders and held tight. Jake put one arm under Marc’s, crouched and leapt, powered by his armor, from the yacht’s deck across the gap between the ships. He smacked against the hull well above the waterline and clung there, driving the fingertips of his armor into the ancient planks, then began to climb hand over hand up the side of the ship, toward the din made by angry dead men preparing for war.

“I know I should be mad, but even I have to admit that was pretty cool,” Will said.

“*Likewise,*” admitted George.

“What do we do?” Cynthia asked. She looked more than a little frightened.

“We stay here, guard the ship and help out any way we can,” Will said as he checked his pistols. “It’s all we can do.”

Jake vaulted over the railing and landed heavily on the deck. Marc let go of him while they were still in the air and landed beside him, shotgun ready. The *Absolution's* crew had been scurrying across the deck in countless directions. A double handful of them now stopped and stared at the two new interlopers.

“Yo ho, me hearties!” Marc laughed as he trained his shotgun on the nearest sailor and fired. The ancient mariner was hurled backward and slammed against the steps leading to the poop deck.

“So much for a sneak attack,” Jake lamented. The air filled with clattering, scraping and clicking sounds as the crew readied their weapons.

“Sorry,” Jake said, “I have a trump card.”

He grabbed the pistol-grip remote for his armor from its hip holster and activated his weapons. The paired set of dual weapon barrels folded upward into place over his shoulders. A second later a twin stream of bullets tore through a sailor who was raising a pistol with a gnarled barrel and flung him, jerking like a marionette caught in a hurricane, over the side railing.

“Avast, matey!” Marc shouted as he blasted a charging marauder. The shell punched a fist-sized hole through the dead man’s chest and his boots skidded on the deck as he was forced backward by the shot, but incredibly, impossibly, he did not fall. He came straight for Marc again in a heartbeat, swinging the rusted remains of a cutlass. Marc stopped him for good with another shotgun blast to the face that hollowed out his rotting skull.

“Dude, don’t talk like that--whoa!” Jake exclaimed as a sailor tackled him from behind. He landed on his stomach with his gun barrels jammed into the deck. The dead man seized him around the neck with both hands readied to crush his larynx. Marc hit him dead in the face with a running kick. The steel toe of his boot broke half of the blackened teeth in the monster’s jaw and forced him backward enough that Jake was able to flip over onto his back and crack the sailor in the temple with a gauntleted punch. Marc then hammered the butt of his shotgun into the pillager’s face and finished him off with a shell.

“This is a snap!” he chuckled.

“Oh, I wish you hadn’t said that,” Jake whimpered. The silhouettes of more than a score of the crew were gathering around them, muttering and cursing in their ancient dialect as they drew closer.

“Ok, scratch impulsive boarding actions off of our list of battle stratagems,” groaned Jake as he and Marc drew back to back.

"I'm enjoying it," Marc chuckled. "I wonder how Nails is doing?"

"Aaaaaiieeyoww!" Nails screamed as he clapped his hands over his eye socket and fell backward onto the deck. "You son of a bitch!"

The sailor that had shot him tossed away his empty pistol, grabbed him by the shirt with one free hand and lifted him into the air like a sack of potatoes, brandishing a rusted dagger in the other hand. He said something that sounded like a threat, but time had made his voice too dry and coarse to be anything but a guttural whisper.

"Go to hell!" Nails shouted. He kicked his enemy in the chest so hard that it threw him backward against the bulkhead, taking the piece of Nails' shirt that he held with him. Nails landed on his feet and was charging the dead man almost before he knew it himself. The sailor dodged aside just in time to avoid the angel's charging punch. Nails' fist smashed against the hull, leaving a deep imprint in the wood. He grabbed the sailor by the leg when he tried to stand again and swung him with all his might against the bulkhead. When what was left tried feebly to crawl away, Nails battered it viciously until it stopped moving.

"Wow," G.R. whispered into the silence that followed. "*Do you think it'll heal?*"

"I...don't know." Very slowly Nails reached up toward the remains of his eye and gingerly began to feel around it, then reached into the wound for the bullet.

"Have you ever heard him swear like that before?" asked Master Pana.

"No," G.R. whimpered. "I thought that pain was the same for him no matter where he was hurt."

"YOU pull a ball of rust out of your own eye with your fingers, see how *you* like it!" Nails growled. He turned and ran back up the stairs the way he'd come. "Breaking the doodad didn't help anything, so I guess we'll just have to do this the hard way."

Gunfire resonated from overhead: first a shotgun, then what could only be Jake's guns.

"Sounds like they've started the fun without me," Nails muttered, none of his usual humor in his voice.

There was more gunfire as he climbed until he was just below the main deck. *Payback time*, he thought as he crouched and leapt, punching through a weakened spot in the upper deck and sending shattered planks of rotting wood flying.

The first thing he noticed was that no one seemed particularly impressed by his entry. Jake was a whirlwind of action, keeping encroaching crewmen at bay with bursts of machinegun fire.

"It's about time!" Marc snarled. He hadn't yet seen Nails' eye: his own eyes were locked on a mariner armed with two wicked-looking pins the size of short swords. The two were circling each other, looking for an opening to exploit.

"I can't keep them busy forever!" shouted Jake as he turned, barely in time, to blast a charging crewman in the face. Another one grabbed him from behind in a headlock and the two of them tumbled to the deck.

In a flash Nails was at Jake's side. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Marc artfully dodge his opponent's slashing motion and bury a hatchet in the dead man's forehead at the same time he pried the attacker's hands away from Jake and hurled him against the nearest mast.

"We could use some help up here!" Jake said as he hopped to his feet.

"Can you get us up there?" Will asked Cynthia.

She nodded. "It's going to take a lot of concentration, so don't let them hit me with anything while we're in the air or we'll both end up in the water."

She took one of his hands in hers. Will drew one of his pistols, checked it, then held it at the ready by his neck.

"Let's go!"

Almost immediately Will felt the familiar sensation of Cynthia's telekinesis lifting him: a

universal pressure all across his skin. Then they were levitating, slowly at first, then more rapidly, rising above the yacht and out over the *Absolution*. Soon they were looking down upon the chaos on deck. Nails, Jake and Marc were still holding their own, fighting only a few at a time while most of the crew kept their distance, ominous silhouettes aboard the ruined ship. More of the crew lingered at the stern, still working to repair the rudder.

“Why are they holding back?” Will wondered aloud. “They could overwhelm us!”

“They’re afraid. They want to fight, but they’re afraid it will happen again,” Cynthia replied.

Will did not understand her words, but her tone worried him. It was the empty, emotionless voice she used in moments of great concentration and distraction and Will knew better than to pester her. When one of the sailors caught sight of them as they began to descend, Will quickly put a bullet through his left eye socket. The silver round burned and bored an ugly hole clean through the dead man’s head, but to Will’s horror when Cynthia set them down on the deck the abomination was still standing.

“These things *are* strong!” Will exclaimed as he put a second bullet in the monster’s head, finishing it off.

“Thanks for that!” Marc gagged as he hammered his pipe into the face of a corpse that was clutching at his throat. Half-rotted facial bones crunched and skeletal hands reflexively pulled away to cover the injury a split second before they would have crushed Marc’s neck.

Jake fired a long burst into an advancing sailor. The powerful rounds tore the brute to shreds in seconds, but Will’s heart sank when Jake held up the first two fingers of his left hand together--an old team signal that loosely meant “I’m desperately low on ammo, do something quick!”

“Jake, your plasma!” Will shouted. “Target the masts! Burn them to the deck!”

Silence suddenly gripped the battle on deck as every remaining member of the crew turned their eyeless gaze to Will. In a maritime nation like Ylelon even landlubbers knew that fire was one of a sailor’s worst fears. Will had been counting on the threat of it to force a standoff.

The dead men fingered their weapons and glared at Will. More silhouettes began to appear on the poop deck as the sailors who had been repairing the rudder abandoned the task to join their fellows. Very quickly, the team was surrounded by eerily silent scions of the past.

“It’s not working!” Cynthia warned. Already the crew was beginning to draw near. Their whispered threats and curses were like death rattles.

“Stay away!” Will commanded as he brandished his pistols.

“They think we’re here to take them back!” cried Cynthia. Jake turned his guns skyward and fired a short burst of plasma. The blue-white balls of burning gas warmed the night air like a bonfire, but the *Absolution*’s crew did not slow their advance. The Lonely Winds were all but surrounded, huddled near the main mast with one railing at their backs and a ring of undead closing in on them.

Stop.

The voice reached every member of the crew, not in their ears but in their minds. Now they did stop, halting abruptly and shifting their murderous gazes from Will to Cynthia.

“Ok...I guess it’s working?” Jake said.

We don’t want you to come back, said the voice in the dead men’s heads. Though they did not understand what it meant, they knew without a doubt where it was coming from.

Are you the one that did this to us? It was difficult even for Cynthia to tell where the question first came from, with her mind open to so many others, but soon she was barraged by questions, demands, threats. She pressed a hand against her temple as dozens of mental voices assaulted her consciousness and finally, she broke the connection.

“Cynthia?” Will asked uneasily as he eyed the suddenly silent horde. “What’s happening?”

He and the others were startled when the crewmen let out a horrendous battlecry and rushed past them toward Cynthia. She had time for a single shriek before they mobbed her and she was hidden from sight.

It was Marc that saved Cynthia.

The others were quick to act. Will had his pistols aimed in the blink of an eye and sent silver

rounds tearing into the mob, to little avail. Jake desperately fired off the last of his machinegun rounds, shredding one dead sailor and shearing an arm from another before his ammo stores ran dry. Nails leapt into the fray, hammering at the dead marauders with mighty blows that cracked skulls and shattered ribcages, yet those he did not fell ignored him in their rage. They shrieked and spat and clawed with bony fingers at the force field Cynthia cringed helplessly behind. She felt her shield weakening under the relentless assault of the dead men now convinced that she was somehow to blame for their forsaken state, knowing it was only moments before her defenses fell and the dead tore her limb from limb.

Marc was nobody's intellectual, but when it came to fighting he had a rare natural talent and a keen instinct. A mere glance told him that the others' efforts, brave as they were, were ultimately futile. There was no way they could do enough damage to what remained of the *Absolution's* crew fast enough to save Cynthia's life, even with Will sending silver bullets burning craters into the dead men and Nails striking faster than the eye could follow. A diversion was needed and Marc knew just the thing.

Like Will, Marc understood the seafarer's great gear of fire. Unlike Will, his actions were not tempered by inhibitions or moderation: he simply acted. He did so by priming a party favor and hurling it against the forward bulkhead of the captain's cabin. Liquid fire burst from the exploding capsule and crawled across the ancient wood like a living thing, biting into it with chemical flames of unnatural intensity.

The *Absolution* crew looked up from their work, some of them giving out ghastly shrieks, others hurrying to fight the fire. The ingrained fear of a fire aboard ship, it seemed, ran deeper in the sailors' hearts than their misguided rage. Very quickly they abandoned their assault and raced to combat the blaze. Cynthia dropped what remained of her defense and scampered to Will's side.

"Good thinking, big dog!" Jake shouted to Marc over the ruckus of the working marauders. The sailors were desperately trying to deal with the flames using the skeletal materials of the *Absolution* and ignoring the team completely. Then, as if to punctuate the moment, the ship herself shuddered as though settling on an unstable surface.

"...what the hell was that?" Nails asked.

Cynthia stared at the deck for several seconds, then looked at Will. "The power is leaving the ship," she said. "Its heart is gone and it's bleeding to death again."

"I have *got* to stop being impulsively violent," muttered Nails. The others looked at him and saw the ruin of his eye for the first time.

"Would it even help to ask what happened?" Will moaned.

"*You don't have time for this!*" George warned. "*Get back to your craft while the revenants are distracted!*"

The team ran to the railing, only to discover that their yacht had drifted a stone's throw away.

"Yeah, this is all we need," Will snapped. "Cynthia, can you get us back to the boat?"

"Not all of us at once."

The ship rocked again more violently and seemed to fall several inches. Jake was reminded of hitting a pothole while driving at high speed and mentally kicked himself for being distracted.

"I can take Marc and Jake," Nails said.

Marc snorted as he and Jake threw arms over Nails' shoulders. "Would someone *please* tell me what the hell is happening?"

"*A cursory posit,*" George began as Nails and Cynthia air-lifted the team, "*would be that the eldritch artifact Nails destroyed below decks was the source of the forces keeping the Absolution seaworthy in spite of its decrepit state and the loss of that source is causing the ship's condition to catch up with it, as it were.*"

"...what?!" hissed Marc.

"Nails yanked the batteries and the tub's going in the drink!" Jake shouted.

The team touched down on the yacht's deck seconds later. Immediately Jake shrugged off his depleted weapon pack, letting it clatter to the deck as he ran for the helm. The *Absolution* was now listing dangerously to starboard. The flames aboard deck had grown high enough to be visible from the waterline.

“Jake, give us some distance!” Will called, then turned to Nails. “Are you going to be all right?”

“I guess I’ll know when I can see out of it again,” Nails said sourly. “And why does *every single fight* we get into end with something *on fire*?”

“You’re welcome,” Marc growled.

“They’re going down with the ship, aren’t they?” asked Cynthia sadly. The *Absolution* was now visibly sinking as torrents of seawater rushed in through gaps in the hull.

“Serves ‘em right!” Marc said and spat over the railing. No one noticed the single tear that rolled down Cynthia’s cheek.

I’m sorry this is happening to you, again, she broadcast to the frantic minds of the ancient crew. There’s just no place for you in the world anymore.

As Jake fired up the engine and began to circle the *Absolution*, the disgraced warship sank to the level of the yacht, so that the team could see the dead men aboard deck. Some of them still tried in vain to put out the raging chemical fire even as the seawater began to flow across the deck and slosh around their rotten boots. Others had turned their backs to the flames and glared eyeless hatred at the monster hunters circling them in the tiny pleasure craft. Then the frigid waters closed in around them and drowned the blaze. Only the masts remained visible, standing stark against the sky like dead trees. Soon they were gone as well, lost beneath the frothing sea.

“I vote we consider this entire evening to have sucked,” grumbled Nails.

“*That was quick thinking, Marc,*” George praised. “*You likely saved Cynthia’s life.*”

“Don’t get sappy with me. You know I just like to wreck stuff,” Marc huffed, but he was grinning.

“Shall we get the hell out of here?” suggested Jake.

“Please,” Will said wryly. As the yacht picked up speed and turned away from the patch of bubbles and foam where the *Absolution* had been, Cynthia waved a tearful farewell.

Chapter IV The More Things Change

“This,” Jake said somberly from his seat at the Situation Room table, “is unacceptable.”

George, sitting in his own chair at the head of the table, tented his fingers and said nothing. Nails, Marc, Will and G.R. were attentive and silent. Master Pana was, impressively, as poised and quiet as Sullivan. Cynthia had not said a word since the sea had claimed the *Absolution* for the second time.

“We can’t keep playing this on the defensive. We have *got* to start being more proactive,” Jake continued.

“What do you mean?” grated Marc. “The losers turned up and we kicked their asses.”

Jake shook his head. “That’s not what I’m talking about. We knew this was pretty weird from the beginning, dead sailors attacking a freighter. But then Nails does his lonesome hero bit and finds strong evidence that this was a deliberate occurrence. Someone raised that ship and set it on the populace.”

“Seems like a waste of effort,” Nails opined. “All they did was murder a few working men and steal some groceries.”

“True,” replied Jake, “but imagine if they had made it to shore tonight and ran amuck in the poor neighborhoods by the bay.”

“I see your point,” said Will somberly.

“What are you postulating, Jake?” asked George.

Jake scratched at his beard in a thoughtful gesture. “As usual, I’m not really sure. The pieces keep adding up, but they all look pretty similar. . . .is that a mixed metaphor?”

“Anyway: little trap-building imps, dead people underground, those clawed creatures, now these marauders of yesteryear. If the same intellect is behind it all--and basic logic suggests it is--then someone’s going to a lot of trouble for a handful of isolated incidents.”

“But we know it takes a great deal of power to do these things!” said Will. “The summoning circles alone would take massive power just to create and they’re so advanced in design that even George’s files don’t have them on record.”

“Therein lies the problem,” Jake replied with a sober expression. “You discover one or more innovative techniques, a new technology, let’s say. They all require considerable resources to realize and have immense potential for destruction, yet they are only used in contained circumstances, well, what’s the term for that?”

George looked away from the others and laid his hands on the table. “It’s called weapons testing.”

Jaws dropped all around the table. Even Sullivan pulled back from the table slightly as if in revulsion.

“That was my initial reaction,” Jake said.

“It’s the dragon, isn’t it?” muttered Nails. “This is why that Atla guy was so pushy. The dragon’s putting together some kind of invasion plan.”

“That’s my theory,” said Jake.

“First the circles, now another approach,” Master Pana observed. “He’s figuring out the best way to create an instant army.”

“What is he going to do? Flood Ylelon with hordes of random monsters?” said G.R.. The silence in the room after his remark was deafening.

“We need to do something about this,” Jake said resolutely. “Something bad is coming, something on a massive scale, and the people of this country won’t even know it until some slimy freak is kicking down their door and eating their families!”

“This brings us back to our basic problem, Jake,” George said. “How do you prevent a war from starting?”

“You sound like you’ve already given up, George,” Will chided. “What are we to do? Lay down and die while Terek Domar gradually murders everyone in Ylelon with his pets?”

Both Master Pana and George winced at that remark.

“What would *you* do?” George finally asked in a tone as cold as ice. “Take your five lion-hearted

champions, track down a murderous dragon and shame him with your cutting remarks?”

“Gentlemen, please. This is not helping,” Master Pana said.

“I’ll only say this,” Nails put in as he leaned back in his chair and took off his bandage. His eye was healed.

“I’m in this to the end,” he said. “To me, this job is like being a firefighter. You don’t do that hoping that someday peoples’ homes will stop burning. Giving up is not an option, anymore than being mad at fire is.”

“A dragon isn’t fire,” Jake retorted. “This creature is intelligent and seems determined to wipe out the populace.”

“I’ll be sure to scold him the next time he knocks me out of the sky without noticing me,” Nails rumbled.

“Do we still have the amulet to call Atla?” suggested G.R.. “He seemed pretty insistent that we help him before. Maybe he knew what he was talking about.”

George’s expression darkened. “Enlightened or not, Mr. Atla does not strike me as an upstanding individual.”

“He makes victims of everyone,” Cynthia whispered.

“...what’s that, sweetie?” asked Sullivan.

“The men on that ship were finished!” Cynthia said with uncharacteristic force. “They did awful things, and they were punished with awful things. Then they died and were resting until they were forced to wake up again. They were monsters, but the monster that did this is worse. He makes victims of *everyone*.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” George said, “so everyone get some rest. We can discuss this again when we aren’t feeling so overwhelmed.”

“Sure, we’ll sleep on it,” Jake muttered.

The meeting ended just like that and the team members went on their way. George, Master Pana, and Nails lingered, and George was pleased to see Will speaking softly to Cynthia as they left.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Master Pana asked Nails.

“Yes and no,” was the reply.

“How’s your eye?” asked George.

“Fine. That’s the problem.” Nails balled his bandages up absently as he spoke. “I’ve been careless once too often. By all rights I should be dead.”

“You haven’t anything to be ashamed of, Nails. You literally took a bullet for the team,” praised George.

Nails shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. I keep promising myself that I won’t be careless and I’ll stop being cocky, so what happens? I get shot in the face.”

“There is no harm done. You appear to have recovered completely from your ordeal,” Master Pana offered, but he didn’t sound convinced by his own words.

“*That’s* what I mean,” Nails replied. “What if it had been one of the others with me? What if one of them had died because I was careless?”

“That...is a dilemma,” George admitted.

“You begin to see the issue,” Nails said, smiling humorlessly. “I need to become battle-hardened. I can knock a man out without injuring him, or I can punch through a brick wall, but I need to learn to combine that skill and that strength. Master Pana, training here with you has been a wonderful experience, but I need to be pushed to my limits. I need to be *fighting*.”

George looked at him sidelong. “What are you thinking of doing?”

“I have something in mind, but it means I’d have to be gone for a while, maybe days. I’m sorry, I know that things are bad and getting worse and you need everyone here right now, but this is the only way I can think of to get what I need in the shortest time possible.”

George nodded his understanding.

“Will we be able to reach you if need be?” asked Master Pana.

“I don’t think so,” Nails replied. “I just wanted to make sure you knew why I’m abandoning you.”

“You aren’t abandoning us,” George said through a smile. “You have seen a personal flaw and endeavored to fix it, for the benefit of yourself and those around you. There are few nobler pursuits in life.”

“Thank you,” Nails said and rose from his chair. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone, but if I can work things out I should be able to start making regular trips.”

He rose from his seat and walked to the door. “See you around,” he said and departed.

“Do you know where he’s going?” Master Pana asked.

“I believe I do,” George replied.

Just under an hour later Nails alighted on the rooftop of a particular abandoned apartment complex. Within moments he found himself gazing at the artistically-arranged lights upon the plinth that opened the way to the Pit. Through he knew nothing about how to operate it, he guessed that a large, bright red circle in the lower right-hand corner was important and touched it. Light filled the apartment and then subsided, and the angel was gone.

Epilogue

While Nails was making his way between worlds, Atla was making his way through the warehouses in a more conventional fashion, mundane especially for a wizard--on foot. On this occasion his all-concealing robes were of purest white, adorned with glyphs and sigils of gold thread. Once again he walked alone through a part of the city infested with gangs and muggers: once again, he went unmolested.

It was the same ritual as countless times before. Atla came to the side door of the decrepit warehouse and used his key to open the heavy new lock. Terek Domar was waiting for him inside, crouched beneath the rafters of the two-story roof that was barely high enough for him, bathed in the blood-red light of his own baleful eyes.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Atla quipped.

The dragon growled at him, a sound like thunder on the horizon. It stopped when they were joined by a third party: the Glass Man. The crystalline golem entered through Atla’s door and strolled to stand to the side of the dragon and the mage, positioned neither between them nor directly facing either of them.

“Yes? Report!” Terek Domar thundered. The sheet metal walls shook with his words.

The Glass Man looked up at the dragon and spoke with the age-worn, confident voice of a physics professor teaching a basic class.

“The *Absolution* was deterred by the adventurers and sank many knots from the bay. When she struck the ocean bottom inertia crushed her into driftwood.”

“What of the crew?” rumbled Terek Domar.

“There was no sign of them when I found the wreck,” said the Glass Man, this time in a snickering tenor voice with a tone that betrayed a sadistic glee at the ambiguity of its report.

Terek Domar growled again, a throaty expression of disappointment.

“Toldya!” Atla laughed. “Although, I’ve got to give it this: it was an interesting experiment.”

Terek Domar blinked, momentarily casting the scene in darkness. “Leave us,” he ordered the Glass Man, then loomed menacingly close to Atla. “The End is coming, old fool,” he said, “so for your own sake, be sure you are ready.”

The dragon closed his eyes and left the warehouse in darkness again. Atla walked calmly to the doorway, but just before exiting, he turned and looked, as if nervous, over his shoulder.