

Zeitgeist Interlude

On the day of the great quake, as the last violent paroxysms of Cauldron Hill send shockwaves throughout Flint, beneath the city streets, three figures stumble down twisting passageways and careen off shuddering walls. During intermittent moments of calm, when the apoplectic earth is still, they hurtle along as fast as they can, making good on their escape. When it heaves, they do their best to keep going, and when they fall they simply pick themselves up, grimace, and carry on.

None seems suited to this desperate flight: the white-bearded old man in simple leather working gear; the beautiful dark-skinned eladrin woman in elegant green robes, her hair piled high in the Elfaivaran style; and behind them – a wonder to behold – a slender bronze golem that heralds in its very subtlety of manufacture the dawn of a new technological age.

Helter-skelter they go: the old man breathless, but alive with the electricity of fear; the woman long-limbed and vital enough to manage without breaking sweat, but wearing a strangely impassive mien, occasionally bewildered, seeming not to recognise her surroundings or herself, dragged along the corridors by her elderly companion; and the golem, keeping pace with staccato strides, stopping every now and then to scan the tunnels behind them, its intricate face betraying fear as real as any man's.

Again the earth shakes, violently. They stumble as the passage ends, and fall into a huge, hot, high-domed chamber, filled with fumes and immense industrial engines. A steel mill. It is clear from the way that tools and carts have been left abandoned and upended that the mill was hastily evacuated when the quakes began.

Clambering to his feet, the old man fights for breath and smears streaks of sweat and dirt across his face, while the woman rises to her haunches, nobility forgot, looking blankly all about her like a newborn fawn; the blast furnace and coke oven, and the neat, high piles of lime and coke might be a part of some alien landscape for all that they mean to her.

While its companions gather their wits, the golem stands alert, watching the passage behind them. Another rumble, then stillness for a time. Only their ragged breathing can be heard. The blast furnace gives a belch.

Gently, the old man helps the woman up, just as the golem turns, alarmed. A single syllable escapes its lips before it freezes - freezes stock still, spasms as if stretched out on an invisible rack, and then spins through the air to land, heavy as a girder, at the feet of the old man and the eladrin. They stop in their tracks and look back.

From the murk of the tunnels a figure sweeps. He stands atop a thin metal disc, his arms outstretched. Anger emanates from this ugly man, his wide, taut face a mask of ire. He wears a thick, purple, velvet cape, and his hair and beard form an unruly thatch. When he speaks it is in Crisillyiri, nasal and abrasive:

“So, you thought to make a fool of me, Alexander? And ruin everything we have accomplished together? Who knows how much damage you have wrought with your foolishness?”

“You are insane,” replies the old man. “I have no more words for you. Do what you must.”

“Oh, I shall. Fear not. I shall take great pleasure in these next few moments.”

Feebly, the old man raises his arms, as if he knows the incantation he attempts will be futile. Sure enough, with a mere gesture, the pursuer causes two iron rods to fly through the air and binds them around the old man’s wrists and ankles, twisting the rods deftly as if they are nothing more than coils of rope. Pain etches the old man’s countenance as finger and toe bones crack. Then the predator advances, drawing from his robes a vial of witchoil. He removes the stopper and, with a clatter, roughly forces the neck of the vial between the old man’s teeth. The eladrin woman watches in vacant horror as he pours the noxious contents down the old man’s throat.

As the old man splutters and chokes, gagging on the thick black oil, his eyes glaze over, and his pupils seem to effervesce almost imperceptibly - a glimmer of magic which his assailant missed. All of a sudden, the bronze golem, not as feeble as it seemed, springs to life, lurches towards its master and crushes his skull with a single powerful blow, ending his torment. Witchoil mingles with his spattered blood. But it does not sparkle.

Revenge denied, the ravaging pursuer gives an inchoate scream of rage and with a flick of his fingers, the golem sunders, rent in an instant into tiny fragments, exploding outward like a clockwork bomb, showering pieces upon the chamber floor.

The madman calms his breath, smoothes his fringe ineffectually and offers his arm to the eladrin woman who still crouches on the floor.

“My apologies for exposing you to such danger, Madame,” he says with a bow. “May I?”

