

The Price of Freedom

By Matt Forbeck

Sig Eightfingers cursed like a burning witch as his sweat-covered wrench slipped from his maimed hand. He drew a greasy paw across his soot-stained forehead, pulling back the singed, brown hair that had fallen out of his long, single braid. He stopped his tirade for a moment to watch the wrench ricochet back and forth through the innards of the steam horse whose shoulders he was straddling and wedge itself tightly in the teeth of the main cog.

"Durni!" he bellowed, straining to make himself heard above the noise the steam engine made as it began its protest at being stopped cold. "Get that wrench out of there. Now!"

The young, blond-haired Dwarf, barely bearded, looked up at Sig from his station across the room. The two magnifying lenses held over his eyes by spiderlike arms attached to his headband made his pupils seem three times their normal size. The young Dwarf cupped his hands to his ears and yelled back, "What?"

Sig, now sure that his young charges couldn't hear him, unleashed a string of curses which could have turned that burning witch's ears black. As he leapt down from the steam horse's back, Durni and his brother Jurni dashed over from their benches in Sig's workroom.

From under the lift that held the steam horse suspended in the air, Sig peered into brassy creature's guts. "She's jammed good," he said, stroking his long beard, which was natty with grime.

Durni looked where his master was gazing, then realized he was still wearing his magnifying lenses. A quick flip of his wrists moved them out of the way. By the time his eyes refocused, his younger brother was already stabbing his hand into the steam horse's belly.

Sig slapped the red-haired bearding's hand away with his damaged mitt. "Do that, and she's likely to blow," he said. "The pressure building up in there is already enough to kill us all."

"Is there a release valve?" Jurni asked, cradling his stinging hand.

"It's a prototype," Durni said. "We haven't gotten to it."

Jurni goggled at his older brother. "We created a machine like this without installing a safety valve?" The younger Dwarf raised his hands as if to strangle Durni. The machine began to groan like a dragon rousing from a century-long nap. The two brothers glanced at each other and then started for the exit.

"Quiet," Sig growled, before they got three steps. "I'm concentrating."

The young Dwarves turned back to see the Sig with a long, straight awl in his three-fingered hand. He was pointing it into the heart of the steam horse.

"Don't!" Jurni screamed. "You'll kill us all!"

"Possibly," Sig said as he lined up the awl at his chosen spot. The two brothers looked at each other again and then dove for cover behind a nearby workbench.

Sig squinted at the steam engine pounding away in the brassy horse's chest. It was starting to deform at the seams, but the careful welds he'd made still held tight. He snaked his hand through the wildly whirring belts and cogs, leaning further into the contraption as he did. He felt around quickly with the tip of the awl for the right spot, twisting his hand at an awkward angle.

Then Sig took a deep breath, held it, and punched the awl into the brass casing.

A shriek pierced the air as the steam threatening to destroy the engine finally found a means of escape. Sig winced at the noise, but he carefully withdrew his hand as the steam gradually blew itself down to a low whistle and then entirely out.

As the engine hiccupped to a halt, Durni and Jurni crept out from behind their shelter. "Is it safe?" Jurni asked hesitantly.

Sig snorted as he went to put the awl back into its proper spot on his own workbench. "If it wasn't, I doubt you two'd be showing your faces."

"That was amazing," said Durni. "I've never seen anyone so cool toward death."

"Get out more," Sig said. "That wasn't death. It was a machine. I know machines."

Jurni, who was breathing heavily in an attempt to not vomit, "And you used your half a hand! Were you trying to kill us? Have you no respect for our lives?"

Durni shot his younger brother a murderous look. His face then filled with fear as the older Dwarf turned to face Jurni.

Sig tossed the awl up and caught it again, flipping it through the air as it went. He repeated this several times, staring into Jurni's eyes all the while. "It's not what you've got," he said, just as he hurled the awl at Jurni. It zipped high over the bearding's head and clashed against something with a metallic clang. "It's what you do with it."

Jurni's lips curled into a sneer. "But you missed—" The young Dwarf was cut off as a brass cauldron spilled off the shelf above him and fell neatly over his head. By the time the bearding managed to pull the cauldron off his head, his face was as red as it had been steamed in the pot.

"My apologies," Jurni said. "I thought—well. I was a fool."

Sig nodded. "All apprentices are."

"Perhaps not only apprentices," Jurni said. As the words left his lips, he looked down at Sig's maimed hand. The last two fingers on it were almost entirely gone. Only the barest of stubs remained. "How is it that you lost your fingers, Master Sig?"

Durni's jaw dropped at his brother's impertinence. He started to reprimand the bearding, but Sig stopped him with a wave of his good hand.

"That's a fair question," Sig said. "It deserves a fair answer. Most of my apprentices are too afraid to ask."

Jurni nodded. "There are rumors," he began.

"That they were bit off by a mule," Sig finished. "Or cut off in the window of an angry cuckold. Or lost in a game of chance with a fire dragon."

"Among others," Jurni said.

"Those are all fine stories. You could pick one of them and enjoy it for all it's worth. But you want the truth instead."

Jurni hesitated for a moment, glancing over at his older brother. Then he nodded.

"Fair enough," Sig said. He strode over to his workbench and sat down, motioning for the two brothers to also take a seat. "Here's the truth."

Sig sat quietly for a long while. Then he spoke.

"Not so many years ago, but before either of you likely had the barest of whiskers on your chins, I was a slave in the Golemworks at Enos Joppa."

Jurni gasped, then clapped a hand to his mouth, surprised at his reaction. His brother look at him with scorn. Sig ignored them both and continued on.

"You lowlanders think you had it tough. The both of you together aren't old enough to measure the kind of misery most Dwarves from that part of the world got in a week. This was long before Blackwyn liberated the place, of course. Many years."

Jurni choked, then winced under Durni's stony glare. Sig nodded at the young Dwarf to speak. "If you're going to interrupt me, beardling, you might as well spit out whatever's burning your tongue."

Jurni opened his mouth, then thought better of it and looked over at his older brother, who was clapping his broad hand to his forehead in frustration. Finally, Jurni gave it another try. "Were you a—? I mean, did you have to work in—? Well, um...." The young Dwarf's voice trailed off into silence.

Sig savored Jurni's discomfort for a moment before continuing on. "Was I a slave? Yes. Did I work in the Kuttar Depths? Not for long.

"Like most of the Dwarves of my homeland, I started out working the Magestone mines there. And, yes, beardling, before you ask, it was just as bad there as you've heard.

"The mining itself wasn't so bad. Dwarves are born to scratch precious things from the Land, it seems, and to folk like us Magestone is just another kind of rock.

"The Magespawn, though. They were something else.

"Most of my kin worked the strip mines for the Atlanteans from before I was born, and we all figured we'd be there until we were dead—and maybe beyond. It was all I ever knew.

"Sometimes the older folk spoke of freedom, but when you've never tasted that sweet nectar, it's only a fairy tale, something to put children to bed with at night. And childhood never lasted long in the Kuttar Depths.

"I never thought much about freedom after I came of age. I just did what my elders asked, following their example. I kept my head down and my pick moving.

"That's how I got their attention—the Atlanteans, I mean. Pulling Magestone out of the earth is brutal work, strip mines or no. We were constantly breaking our picks, and the drivers would take the cost out of our hides.

"When I finally got tired of taking those beatings, I sat down and figured out a way to reinforce the haft of my pick so it was nearly unbreakable. It didn't take much, but no one else had ever come up with it before, so I guess that meant something.

"For a long time, I kept the secret of making the proper pick handle to myself. I didn't have a lab like this," Sig said, gesturing at the tool-lined walls and workbenches around them. "I had no way to test it, and I didn't want anyone else getting a beating on my behalf.

"Once I was pretty sure I'd worked it out, though, I started making pick hafts for my family and friends. Of course, when people saw what I'd done for them, they wanted a 'Sig-haft' as they called it, for themselves.

"It didn't take long for a driver to get his hands on one of the Sig-hafts and realize what I'd done. A few hours later, he'd managed to backtrack the handle to me, leaving a half-dozen battered Dwarves in his wake, and that, I was pretty sure, was that.

"Instead of beating me, though, the driver showed up with a pack of enforcers in tow. Before I could say 'boo,' they had me in chains and were dragging me out of the Kuttar Depths. Up toward the surface.

"When they hauled me into the offices of the mining supervisor, I couldn't see a thing. I hadn't seen actual sunlight since my childhood, and it took a while for my eyes to adjust. In the meantime, through the green haze, all I could see was a pair of tall shapes standing before a blazing white light.

"As my eyes adjusted, I realized that I was watching two Atlanteans standing in front of a window. They were talking about me.

"I had never met the Karsden Rotheart before, but I knew him instantly. The Human in charge of the Kuttar Depths was legendary among the Dwarves who worked under his command. Tall and fat, with a merciless streak, he wheezed as he spoke, like a holed bellows. Word was that the years of proximity to the mined Magestone were finally taking their toll on the old man, but it was clear that he was too mean to ever die—at least not from something as slow as that.

"Rotheart had worked himself up into a lather about something, but his companion was as cool as the bottom of an underground lake. I didn't know who he was then, but I later learned far more about him than I ever wanted to know. His name was Malhotep."

Jurni blanched at the mere mention of the name. Durni made as if to slap his brother's courage back into him, but he was too green around his beard to give Jurni more than a half-hearted poke.

"The Ghoul of the Golemworks?" Jurni whispered before he could keep the words from spilling past his lips.

"The same," Sig nodded. "I didn't know that at the time. I was more frightened of Rotheart, which shows how ignorant I was."

"They were talking when the drivers hauled me in. They didn't even pause to acknowledge us when we entered. It wasn't long before I realized they were talking about me. It was when the taller, thinner shadow turned toward me and nodded, 'This is he?'"

"'Yeah,' Rotheart grunted. 'But he ain't worth your bother. He's just another Dwarf, dumb as the rock he's been picking.'"

"Malhotep snorted softly, derisively. 'I will judge that.' He reached out and grabbed me by the chin. As my eyes adjusted, I got my first good look at him, face to face."

"As I said, he was tall and thin, but from a Dwarf's point of view, that covers most Humans. Still, he was more so than most. His skin seemed to be stretched over his bones like a wet hide on a steel frame. Skinny as he was, he radiated solidity—and danger. Just above his steely eyes, three Magestones surgically embedded in his forehead stared back at me as well, making him seem like some cold-blooded insect."

"Malhotep looked me over like a side of beef. As he gazed into my eyes, I glared back at him. What he saw there, I don't know, but after a long moment a smile crept along his lips. 'Yes,' he said. 'This one will do.'"

"The next thing I knew, the drivers yanked me out of there as fast as they'd brought me in. I found myself in the back of a wagon, still in chains, watching more of the world roll past me than I'd ever seen before."

"I didn't run into Malhotep for weeks after that, and I never saw Rotheart or any of the drivers from the Kuttar Depths again. When the wagon I was in stopped, a pair of guards came around and unshackled me, then let me come down under my own power, into the compound we'd entered."

"I first smelled the place from about a mile off. The stench of soot and molten metals is one that no Dwarf can ignore. By the time I got into the place, the smells were nearly overwhelming."

"When I stepped off the back of that wagon and finally got a good look at the place, I nearly fell over anyhow. Having spent most of my life underground, I'd only seen a few things worthy of the name amazing. The Sulfur Lake. The Crystal Falls. The Pit of Argoth. The Magespawn that attacked my people."

"None of that prepared me for the foul city of Enos Joppa and the corruption that crouches in its heart: the Golemworks.

"The sky above the Kuttar Depths isn't the cleanest in the world, but it was the only patch of blue that I ever knew. Compared to the air above the Golemworks, it's pristine.

"A cloud of dark, gray filth hung low and hungry over the dozens of smokestacks that speared out of the low buildings that covered the land like a fungus. Flames belched from the tops of those tall chimneys, lighting up the underside of the overcast like monstrous fireflies.

"I thought I'd been brought to the Underworld, whole and alive, to do demons' work. I wasn't far off.

"The drivers yanked me off the wagon and dragged me into the place. I was too stunned to protest.

"An amazing thing about the Golemworks. At first, the filth is so bad you think you're going to vomit every time you breathe. Then, after a few hours, it doesn't seem so bad. Within a day or two, your senses are so deadened by the horrors around you that you don't even notice them until someone points them out. Even then, it's like trying to remember what it's like to be clean after you've been living in a mud pit your entire life.

"At that moment, though, my senses were working perfectly. As they brought me through the gate, I vomited what little I'd had to eat all over myself. Fortunately, I missed the drivers, or they'd have beaten me nearly to death, no matter how valuable a prisoner I might have been. Instead, they just laughed.

"Mercifully, I passed out.

"The next thing I knew, someone was slapping me awake. I don't remember who it was. When I opened my eyes, Malhotep was there.

"'Welcome, Dwarf,' he said, showing all his sharpened teeth, 'to the last home you will ever know.'

"With that, he nodded at the drivers behind me. They pulled me to my feet and dragged me off to my new living quarters and workroom: Warehouse Six.

"They put me to work right away. I started out maintaining the golems they already had. It was my job to keep them oiled and clean—or what passed for clean in that cesspool.

"There were other Dwarves there, but we weren't allowed to talk much with each other. Any time someone said a word unrelated to work, he got a lash across his back. I did my best to keep my head down and my eyes on my job.

"As time wore on, my drivers decided that I was not only talented but trustworthy. Slowly, they moved me up to better and better jobs, giving me just a bit more freedom each time. By the time they moved me onto the design team, I could wander about the Golemworks pretty much where I wanted, as long as I avoided the areas restricted to Atlanteans only.

"For most of those years, I worked on building and improving the Atlanteans' golems. I started out working on brass golems but eventually moved up to blade golems. No one could sharpen and align those blades like me.

"During those last couple years, I found I didn't mind much working at the Golemworks. As hard as it is to believe now, I actually liked it. As one of the top golem workers, I was treated well. I ate the best food, stayed in one of the finest apartments, and the drivers generally left me alone. I'd learned to ignore the screams and sobs of the lower workers, just as my body had become jaded to the place's smell.

"As ashamed as I am to admit it, the suffering of those around me didn't matter much anymore. Instead, I was engrossed by the development of newer and better golems. My work meant more to me than anything.

"Five years into my term at Golemworks, Malhotep walked into Warehouse Six, bearing a long, thick roll of papers. 'You,' he said, his eyes drilling into me. 'We are developing a new class of golem.' He tossed the roll down on to my work desk, where they unfurled, revealing rough design sketches. 'You are to lead the production team. I expect to have a finished prototype within three months.'

"Malhotep turned to leave, but he stopped when he saw me step forward to look at the papers. I frowned immediately. The sketches were like nothing I'd ever seen. Even on the face of it, this was to be a very different kind of golem.

"'This is a whole new job,' I said. 'It'll take six months at least.' Malhotep leaned over me, his eyes blazing over his frown. I don't think he was used to anyone ever standing up to him. I'd never seen it happen before myself.

"I could almost read the minds of the Dwarves working under me as they watched me face off against the Atlantean lord of the Golemworks. They must have thought I was insane. Perhaps I was. None of them said a word to support me.

"'You have three months,' Malhotep repeated.

"'It can't be done,' I said. I heard the Dwarves behind me gasp.

"Most of the drivers would have smacked me then and there, maybe driven a knife into my side. Not Malhotep. Nothing got under his skin. He stood there and considered me for a moment before speaking.

"'What do you need?' he asked.

"'Six months.'

"Malhotep waved my words away like gnats swirling around his head. 'Besides that.'

"I thought about it for a moment.

"'This is important,' he said. 'Whatever you need, if it is within my power, it's yours.' He wasn't bargaining, simply stating a fact.

"My face lit up.

"'Yes?' Malhotep asked.

"I looked him squarely in the eyes and said the two words clearly and evenly: 'Helg. My eldest sister.'

"The Ghoul of the Golemworks looked down at me and laughed. It was the cruelest sound I've ever heard. 'And with this Dwarf at your side, you can complete this work in three months?'

"'I don't know,' I said, 'but without her here, I don't have a chance.

"Malhotep nodded at me approvingly and permitted himself to smile, slowly revealing all his sharpened teeth. 'Done,' he said, then turned and left.

"Within a day, my sister Helg was at my side."

"But what happened to her?" Jurni said, almost bursting. "I've never met her. Is she—? Oh."

Durni reached over and smacked his younger brother atop his scalp. "You haven't a lick of sense in your head, do you?" Durni said. Jurni started to protest, but Durni cut him off. "Don't rush the Dwarf, you fool," Durni said. "He's telling a story. He'll get to all that in due time."

"Your faith is refreshing," Sig said. "You should listen this well when I'm telling you how to weld an elbow joint." Durni started to protest, but Sig waved him down. "I'm in the middle of a story, remember?"

"As I was saying, they brought Helg to me, and we started in on this new golem of theirs right away. It was as tall as a blade golem, but instead of using knives and saws to savage its foes, it was able to channel the raw energies of Magestone against them."

Jurni gasped, then flinched as he looked over at his brother. Durni ignored him.

"That's right," Sig said. "It was a storm golem. The first one.

"At first, Helg and I threw ourselves hard into the job. She was a brilliant designer, better than me, I always thought. She was the one who figured out how to properly mount the twin Magestone cannons on the thing. Of course, the first thing she did when she saw me was slap me."

Durni looked down at his brother and aimed a backhand at him but held it. "See," he said, "that's what older siblings do."

Sig smiled. "I had it coming," he said. "She was absolutely right. 'You idiot!' she yelled at me. 'If I wanted to work here, don't you think I'd already be here?'

"I protested, but she was right. I'd obviously ignored her wishes. 'But I need your help!' I said.

“For what?’ she asked. ‘To build machines to kill innocents? You’ve been above ground too long, Sig. Open your eyes. The Atlanteans are the enemy. You may not remember a life before our people’s enslavement, but I certainly do. These people are evil. All they make is evil. And you’re helping them.’

“What could I say? She was right. Really right. My only defense was that I hadn’t thought about it until then. To me, then, working for the Atlanteans was what I did. If I wasn’t building golems for them, I’d be scratching out Magestone in the Kuttar Depths, and working with golems was a much better job. If I wasn’t building the golems, someone else would, so why not me? Why not enjoy the fruits that came with such labor?

“I said these and many other things to Helg, but she had no part of it. I got angry. We probably would have come to blows there on the warehouse floor had it not been for the constant oversight of the drivers. Neither of us wanted to end up in the Golemworks’ excuse for a prison.

“In the end, the drivers decided the issue for us. Now that Helg was here, she had little choice. She knew that if she insisted on leaving they wouldn’t bother with bringing her back to the mines. She’d end up lying in a gully on the side of the road, the buzzards picking her apart.

“So she stayed, and we set to work.

“The issue came up between us over and over again, but neither of us seemed to be able to have much of an effect on the other. Eventually, she gave up, and I thanked the gods for her silence. I should have known the truth: Instead of talking with me, she had found others who agreed with her. And they did more than just talk.

“The weeks passed quickly. I didn’t sleep much. There was too much to be done. I was determined to complete the storm golem.

“At first, Helg resisted. She never actually stopped working, as the drivers would have punished her mercilessly for it. She just went about everything as slowly as possible. The sight of it made me grind my teeth, but I never voiced a word of complaint. As angry as I was at her, I didn’t want her to come to harm.

“Then, after about a month, Helg’s attitude flipped. She threw herself into the work with a frenzy I’d never seen in her. For a moment, I wondered if Malhotep had worked some magic on her, but when I approached her about it, she simply said, ‘Sig, you really are an idiot,’ and left it at that.

“The deadline for the completion of the storm golem prototype grew closer. With a week left, I knew we were going to make it, although just barely. I’d been right to ask for Helg. Without her help, I wouldn’t have had a chance.

“Three days before the deadline, Malhotep paid us a visit. At first, he was polite, even more so than usual. ‘How is it coming?’ he asked as if he hadn’t been getting daily reports. Eventually he got around to what he came for.

“‘I would like to perform a little test,’ he said.

"I assured him that we'd been testing every element out along the way and that the prototype was working perfectly. He shook his head.

"I understand that, Dwarf," he said. "However, I believe we need to see a more emphatic display of Atlantean power."

"With that, he signaled the drivers. They opened the main doors to the warehouse, and a squad of well-armed drivers stomped in, carrying the bloodied body of a Dwarf, who they tossed at my feet. Stunned as I was, I looked down at the Dwarf's face, fearing what I might see.

"I've never seen this Dwarf in my life," I said.

"I know," Malhotep said. "He's for her." He looked at Helg.

"She ran straight for the storm golem. 'Defend me!' she shouted at the monstrous machine. 'Kill Malhotep!' The thing sprang to life, its Magestone cannons swiveling to bear upon Malhotep. I suddenly realized I was standing next to the creature's target.

"I think it was at that moment I finally knew that what I'd been doing was wrong. When I stared into the barrels of those guns, I felt the horror that anyone who faces such a creature must feel, the utter helplessness. I knew I was going to die at the hands of this contraption and that there was nothing I could do about it.

"Belay that!" I shouted, trying to countermand Helg's order. The golem ignored me. I instantly regretted allowing her to work so closely with the thing, handing over even a part of the thing's pre-bonding controls. If there was any one the creature would obey first, it would be her. I prepared myself to die.

"Belay that," Malhotep said. The storm golem stopped in its tracks, its cannons swiveling down to its sides. Helg screamed.

"That's impossible!" she said. "It hasn't been bonded to a magus yet!"

"Malhotep sniggered. 'Did you think I would leave a traitor like yourself in charge of such a potent weapon and then walk into its line of fire? Until the moment it is bonded to its final master, every golem that walks out of the Golemworks obeys one person above all others: me.

"Drivers," he said. The squad that brought in the dead Dwarf sprang into action, cornered Helg, and wrestled her to the ground.

"Do not damage her—much," Malhotep said. "We need her for the next stage of our little drama."

"A shiver of dread ran down my back as I watched the drivers lash Helg to the target-practice dummy on the far side of the warehouse from the Golem. I started to say something to Malhotep, but he silenced me with a wave of a single finger.

"Patience, Dwarf," he said. Heartsick, I watched the drivers finish with my sister and then step away.

"Malhotep looked down at me and said, 'The storm golem is yours, Dwarf. Please demonstrate the effectiveness of its weapons.'

"I looked over at my sister, then back at Malhotep. I couldn't believe what he was asking—ordering. 'No,' I said, my voice trembling and quiet.

"If the device fails this test,' Malhotep said, 'I will consider this a failure of the entire project. The price for such a failure is higher than you can pay.'

"I looked into Malhotep's eyes and found no mercy there. I glared out at my sister. I shocked myself by being angry at her. Angry that she had apparently been part of some rebellious conspiracy. That she hadn't told me about it. That I was going to have to kill her.

"I walked over to her and saw the tracks of the tears of frustration she had shed. They were already drying on her hot cheeks. 'You must do this,' she whispered at me. 'They will kill me either way.'

"I—' my voice locked up on my like frozen gears. Tears began to roll down my face and catch in my beard.

"You're a good dwarf, Sig. You'll do the right thing—someday.' Helg favored me with a brave smile twisted by a hint of fear. 'In the meantime, let me make this easy on you.'

"With that, she spit in my face and began cursing me at the top of her lungs. 'Traitor!' she railed at me. I knew she was only trying to help me by putting as much distance between us as possible, but that single word hurt the worst.

"I dried my face, wiping away her spittle along with my tears, and returned to Malhotep's side. He merely nodded at me and then at my sister, still strapped to the target dummy and cursing me with all she was worth.

"I steeled myself, then said, 'Golem! Fire away.'

"The brassy beast let loose with both of its Magestone cannons. The raw energy shot from them and crackled through my sister's body, nearly instantly frying her to a crisp. She was burnt so badly that her bonds gave way and she collapsed on the floor.

"Satisfied, Malhotep motioned for his drivers to join him and then left. The first thing we did once he left was put out the flames still burning Helg's corpse.

"The next thing I did was swear revenge.

"I had no idea what Helg had been planning, so I was starting from scratch. Every one of the other Dwarves in the complex wanted to have nothing to do with me. Whether they were Helg's coconspirators or not, they knew that to be seen talking quietly with me would mean instant surveillance and maybe even death. I was going to have to do this on my own.

"The night after Helg's death, I lay awake in bed, trying to figure out what to do. Eventually I struck upon an idea I liked best. It was simple but effective and direct.

"I was going to escape, and I was taking the storm golem with me.

"The security around the Golemworks was as tight the steam engines we custom-built for the prototypes there—production versions used Magestone, of course—but it was mostly geared around keeping people out instead of in. The place was packed with slaves, but nearly all of us had long since given up on ever getting out from under the Atlanteans alive. The remote location of the Golemworks reinforced this, as anyone who managed to escape the place was just about sure to die in the surrounding mountains, long before they were able to find sanctuary.

"Of course, none of those people had ever had a storm golem at their disposal.

"The main problem was that I didn't want to end up like my sister. As Malhotep had made all too clear, he could override any control I had over the storm golem, and I couldn't take the chance that any other Atlantean could too. I needed the storm golem for my plan, so I couldn't disable it—entirely.

"The next day at work, I pretended to be making a few last-minute adjustments to the storm golem's head. As I did, I welded the thing's ears shut. Now it would continue to take orders, but only from hand signals. As it hadn't been bonded to a magus yet, and couldn't be ordered telepathically, which gave me the advantage. As long as I ensured that the creature could only see me, my plan would work.

"That night, I stayed in the warehouse until everyone else had gone to bed. The drivers watching over me ignored me. I commonly pattered around on the storm golem until the wee hours of the night, and no one expected tonight to be an exception.

"Eventually, only one driver remained on duty, and he wasn't paying strict attention to me. At that moment, I stood in front of the golem and signaled exactly what I wanted it to do. It nodded and waited for me to climb atop its shoulders. Once I was on, I slapped it atop its head, and off it went.

"The storm golem's first barrage tore through the lone driver like he was made of paper. The creature's second shots knocked open the warehouse's double-wide doors in a burst of smoke and fire. The golem emerged from the smoke before the alarm had even sounded. By the time we made it to the main gate, the drivers there hadn't yet managed to shut it. We charged straight through the gates and into the night.

"Here's where my plan showed its biggest weakness. Once outside the gates, I had no idea where to go. While I'd left the Golemworks behind, I found myself lost in the heart of Enos Joppa. While I'd heard rumors that there were free settlements to the south. I knew that my only hope was to run for freedom, and I was determined to do so or die trying.

"My main advantage at that point was speed. I doubted that there was any horse or golem in the city that could match my storm golem stride for stride, so I urged the thing on full out toward the south, smashing through whatever resistance the city watch tried to throw in my way. It took me nearly an hour to battle my way out of town, leaving a swath of dead and maimed watchers in my wake.

"As I left the city further and further behind, hope grew in my heart that I had lost the drivers entirely. That I had also lost myself was immaterial. I was free. I would find my way. I actually started to cheer.

"My elation crashed to a halt when a shot from a Magestone cannon seared over my shoulder and into the face of the hill just beyond. I looked behind me, but could not see my attackers anywhere. I began to panic, fearful that some sort of invisible foe had pursued me from the Golemworks. Then another shot landed right in front of me. This one had clearly come from above.

"I looked up, and there it was: an Atlantean flyer, one of those two-passenger sky-wagons favored by their nobles. Only this one bore a Magestone cannon on its prow. One of the Golemworks drivers was working the gun. Malhotep himself was at the ship's controls.

"I started smacking the storm golem's skull, left, right, left, steering him with my crude gestures. I hoped the erratic pattern would frustrate the gunner's efforts, but there was one large factor working against me. The skyship was faster than the golem, so they had all the time in the world.

"Eventually one of the Magestone volleys found its mark and smacked into the storm golem's back, just as we were descending a hillside into a small valley. The entire contraption spun head over heels, with me atop it the entire time. We ended up together in a heap about halfway down the side of the valley, the skyship hovering over us.

"Give yourself up, Dwarf,' Malhotep said. I knew my life was already forfeit at this point. He hoped to trick me into surrendering, but I wasn't about to make his life that easy for him.

"The storm golem's armor had come off in several places, and its prototype steam engine was coughing in protest, but it was still running. Even so, its limbs were shattered, including its Magestone cannons. I tried to get it to stand up and run, but it was no use.

"I looked up, and Malhotep was hovering right over me now. He leaned over the railing of the skyship and spit down at me. 'Your efforts are futile, Dwarf,' he said. 'Surrender now, and I promise to kill you quickly.'

"I scrambled atop the golem's now-open chest. The gears in it didn't whir along as quietly as before, but they were still moving. I picked up a shard of armor plating and tried to shove it into the gears. It was too blunt to fit.

"You have until the count of three, Dwarf,' Malhotep said. 'Then you die. One.'

"Desperate, I looked around for something, anything to gum up the storm golem's works. There were no better candidates than the armor shard that had already failed.

"Two.' A horrible thought struck me then. It would probably work, but I would pay a terrible price for it.

"Three!' The choice between certain death and possibly being maimed was clear. I steeled myself and then jammed my hand into the gears.

"The cogs and wheels protested bitterly at the intrusion of my flesh. I accompanied them with a howl of pain.

"The next I knew, Malhotep was beside me, cursing me by name. I saw the quick flash of a blade, and before I could even scream in protest against the attack I was cut free of the gears that had captured my hand. I stood up, cradling my mangled hand, and watched as Malhotep struggled to remove my missing fingers from the cogs with his blade.

"Insane with pain and desperation, I leapt at the Atlantean, determined to bring him into the afterlife with me. Before I could lay a hand on him, he casually kicked me aside and returned to his work. I tumbled down the hillside in a ball, landing gracelessly on the valley floor.

"As I looked up, I heard the storm golem's engine screaming in protest. The pressure inside the thing was building exponentially by the second. Malhotep still stood over the creature, jamming his sword into it, trying to remove my fingers from the works.

"The steam engine shot out a horrible screech. I closed my eyes, covered my ears, and hunkered down into a ball. Just as I did, the engine exploded.

"I never went back to do a body count or even to figure out what happened to my pursuers. They were likely all dead. The same could possibly have been said of me if Malhotep hadn't kicked me so savagely away.

"I bandaged my hand the best I could, and I started following the line of the valley out and down toward lower lands. I didn't get too far before I passed out from shock.

"The explosion was heard for miles around. Fortunately, a band of Black Powder Rebel scouts was close enough to hear it. They braved the oncoming drivers to peek out of their hiding places to see what was going on. They spotted me and grabbed me and hauled me to safety before the Atlanteans could find me.

"Eventually they brought me to Khamsin and set me free. I remembered my sister and her sacrifice though. I knew what it was to be a slave, and I remembered all those friends and family I'd left behind who were still slaves of the Atlanteans.

"I resolved to do something about it. I joined the Black Powder Rebels and brought my knowledge of how to make golems—and defeat them—to the cause."

Sig stopped speaking for a moment to gauge his audience's reactions. Both Jurni and Durni stared at him in awe. He smiled at the young Dwarves, thankful that they'd not had to live a life such as his. He hoped no Dwarf ever would again, and he was willing to sacrifice more than his fingers to realize that dream.

"And that, my young ones," Sig said as he held up his three-fingered hand, "is why you never stick your hand anywhere near a golem's cogs—unless you're willing to pay the price."

Matt Forbeck creates games and fiction about games for a living. He's been at it full-time for over 14 years now, and he shows no sign of stopping. He has been nominated for and won several Origins Awards, including the 2001 award for Best Short Story ("Prometheus Unwound" from The Book of All Flesh) and the 2002 award for Best Roleplaying Game (The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game). He co-founded Pinnacle Entertainment Group and was the company president for four years before returning to freelancing. For WizKids, he wrote a good chunk of the text for the Mage Knight Legends & Lore cards. He lives in southern Wisconsin with his wife Ann and their five children, Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen. You can learn more about him at www.fullmoonent.com.