

October 12 The large wrench slipped from the bolt as it suddenly gave way. Rose Crowshaw gasped as her knuckles struck the metal plating of the copper turbine. "Dammit!" she cursed in a rather unladylike fashion. She winced and jerked away from the Breach portal support arms that loomed above her. She spat one profanity after the other as she squeezed the gaping wound. Blood flowed through her fingers and dripped upon her overalls. The bright blue disc of light that spanned nearly thirty feet popped, and the droning hum momentarily ceased. The light emanating from the Breach winked out of existence, too, showing the rising hills to the north of Malifaux through the thick metal arms that typically held the strange portal in place. Then it came right back, humming and buzzing in that otherwise endless drone, opaque and swirling with eddies of blue and white. If, like Rose Crowshaw, a person were to look upon the portal with welding goggles on, they'd not only preserve their eyesight, but they might be able to see the strangely swirling and faint movement of ghostly silver figures, smoke-like and gossamer. Wearing such dark lenses obscured the images of the Breach, too, making it difficult to describe what it looked like with any surety. As descriptions of the strange gateway rarely agreed, most people merely left it as "Blue, and so damned bright it'd make the sun blink." The pain in her knuckle subsided slowly as her own special, and secret, ability quickly pulled the flesh together again. New skin formed over the wound, pink and soft, and the throbbing pain still coursed through her, sending strange and uncomfortable waves down her spine. She shivered with each heartbeat. Ana Salea Kaeris, a special contractor for the Miners and Steamfitter's Union, approached. She asked, "Everything okay?" Crowshaw wrapped a greasy rag around the wound, now well on its way to being fully healed. "Oh, yes," she said. "No problem, really. Didn't know anyone was near." They both looked at the other steamfitters working well within earshot. It was enough to puzzle Kaeris, and she made no effort to mask her curiosity. She said, "Must have been a good crack of the knuckle. It's bleeding out pretty good," but Crowshaw knew the bleeding had miraculously ceased. "Let me see it. You probably need to see the medic." "No, no," Rose said as unemotionally as possible. "It's really nothing. I just got excited." The wound would be fully healed in minutes and the very last person she wanted to know about her was Kaeris. That woman was a bloodhound, and she had been "meeting" with just about everyone of prominence in Malifaux, though "interrogation" was probably a more appropriate term. She needed to shift attention. "This damned Breach just won't stabilize," she said, gently tapping the metal frame with her great wrench. "Was it the derailment this past summer?" Crowshaw shrugged, though both women knew it had nothing to do with the derailment. "They tell me it was the Event. I'm just a steamfitter. They don't tell me nothing. Just 'It's broke. Fix it'." Kaeris was shrewd and not easily led down the wrong path. She knew at once that there was more to the young M&SU girl than she wanted known. Kaeris pushed, saying, "Odd to assign a Steamfitter to the Breach, though. It's a pretty unique construct to sustain aether, from no living source, to hold open a portal between worlds. Mostly electricity, isn't it?" Rose Crowshaw grew more anxious and wiped her brow with her filthy rag, putting more grease and oil upon her already dirty face than the perspiration it removed. "Yeah. But these boilers over here drive the small turbines that create the electricity." Her voice was quiet. "Actually, not many of us know about electricity and how it works. I just spend too much time puzzling it out, I suppose." Kaeris understood its operation, of course. If rumors were to be believed, the intimidating woman could likely stabilize the construct holding open the Breach herself. Maybe that's why she had come out to the portal. "But that apparatus you were working on when the wrench slipped – it has nothing to do with the

steamfitting or conversion to electricity. In fact,” and Crowshaw gulped, “It’s part of the converter that sustains the aether modulation. Isn’t it?” Crowshaw wiped her forehead again. “I just... I just had a hunch. I should have sent for an engineer,” she admitted. “You should have sent for Viktor Ramos. Or me.” “Sorry. It won’t happen again.” The white wall of light flickered again and, for a moment, blinked out of existence with a pop. Crackling electricity suddenly flared around the sustaining arms, arcing bolts between them until the Breach re-opened with a gentle rumble of thunder. If they could not stabilize the Breach, whole fortunes might be lost in shipping delays. More importantly, although no one ever made any mention of it, the fear of the Breach closing as it had a hundred years prior was a great a fear to each settler in Malifaux as encountering a Razor-spine rattler. Small tendrils of electricity crawled over the armature as Kaeris took the wrench from Rose Crowshaw. She didn’t take her eyes from the Breach although it was blinding, and she said, “Looks like you didn’t get cut that badly after all.” Rose realized she had removed the rag from her hand to wipe her brow and returned it to a pocket in her overalls, forgetting about the wound. Her blood had spilled on the ground before her and even stained her pant leg. Yet, in the span of their discourse, the wound had fully healed. “Get back to work,” Kaeris said, and Rose thankfully withdrew and would spend the rest of the morning avoiding the intimidating M&SU contractor. Both women knew they’d be speaking again. Kaeris took the wrench and worked on the same apparatus that Rose Crowshaw had been. After all, the frequency modulation was clearly out of sync. She was a patient woman but was anxious to find out how the young steamfitter could know about such advanced mechanisms without any training or, at the least, without having seen any of the engineering drawings of the full device, so intricate that only a handful of people might comprehend its basic operation. Most important, however, was stabilizing the Breach. No one wanted to be trapped in Malifaux. They sought dominion over this world, to conquer it. But an inability to rely upon resources from Earth would lead to their inevitable downfall. CCC Molly Squidpidge bent her face against the wind that tore into her pallid flesh, biting with frozen sleet. She could not be hurt by it and barely felt what was likely a bitter cold. Her arms and face were bare to the elements, but she pushed through it as she might have when she still lived. Seamus had chastised her for such behavior, even recently. She assured him that she wanted only to blend in with the humans – to not draw attention unnecessarily. Seamus said she was clever. She drew enough attention. Although her level of decomposition was markedly different than the dry, desiccated, and deteriorating flesh of Seamus’ other Belles, her flesh was still deathly pallid, and her eyes were too flat, conveying her deathly state as well. “Is it cold?” the head of Philip Tombers asked from the crook of her arm where she carried it, cradled like a child. She held it against her breast, so he was reluctant to say anything. It wasn’t that he necessarily enjoyed her breast pressed against his cheek as he couldn’t exactly feel that, either. He just didn’t want to be thrust back into the damnable sack that was his typical abode and transportation. At least they had upgraded it to soft velvet instead of that infernal burlap. “No,” Molly said as the sleet pelted them. “It’s not too cold.” The burlap itched, he had complained. You can’t feel it, they argued. It smells like old potatoes, he retorted. You cannot smell, either, they quipped. It still has bugs crawling around, he offered. They came with you, not the sack. Still, Seamus bought him a nice velvet bag to shut him up. Tombers didn’t know why Molly had pulled him out, but it was nice to look around, even if he sometimes rolled toward her and the fabric of her dress was all he could see.

They moved easily through the dark alleys, taking a twisted path around a dilapidated and abandoned building adjacent to the Quarantine Zone. Few people walked openly in this dangerous section of the City on a normal night, but with the stinging cold, the two were alone. "Almost there," she said to the head. She conveyed little emotion in her speech or mannerisms, but her voice remained strangely lyrical and soothing even in its monotone. "Where?" he asked. "Quarantine Zone." He knew that. He should have asked why they were going to the Quarantine Zone, and he nearly did, but he bit his tongue. She might stick him back in his bag if he got too chatty. The Guild had secured the Zone well and had few illegal trespasses into the sector. Molly, however, was soon standing upon a mound of debris of broken stone and wood, several city blocks in. If the Guild were patrolling the area, Molly demonstrated no anxiety about standing out in the open. She turned him so that he could see, but the wind and freezing rain limited his sight. "The Guardpost," she said. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he slowly focused upon the burnt remains of a wall and the lower stonework that remained, dark from the fire that had consumed the upper wooden structure. The rain began to turn to thick flakes of snow. He could see the stain of fire around the ruins. The cobblestones near the Guardpost remains were blackened as well. They faced the City, her back against the heart of the Quarantine Zone. He could see the line around the perimeter where the fence had been, just several months earlier. The Guild had moved that line several blocks further in, expanding the Quarantine Zone as it encroached upon the City. "Molly?" "Plague. It lived here." Tombers looked around, shifting his eyes best he could to see whatever it was he was meant to see. For once, he was silent. She said, "They burned it. To stop it. Guards and innocents with the disease lured to the Plague. A Guild officer burned the Guardpost and all of the victims he found here. He meant to burn the plague so that it would not spread. He was clever. But he failed." Tombers added, "I overheard Nicodem's conversation with Seamus afterward. The plagued mob attacked his observatory. Why?" She did not respond. Instead, Molly turned, facing the heart of the Quarantine Zone. Rising before them was a great mound of bodies, piled high and haphazardly. Hundreds of bodies were dumped without compassion in a pile that spread before them and loomed significantly above Molly. It was wide and she had to turn slowly so that he could take it all in. "Damnation," Tombers said, aghast. "This is not where the plague was stopped. It is where it began. Where the Plagued Tyrant lost control of it. In the slums bordering the Guardpost, Plague lingered." Molly went silent and the two surveyed the mound whose circumference spanned at least fifty feet. "The Plagued Pit," she said, meaning the pile. "It's more like a hill than a pit," Tombers offered. "It is a pit. Deep." She was silent again, which was her custom. None of Seamus' Belles spoke, save Molly, and she only did so reluctantly. Speech typically reduced her to a coughing and spasming fit in which she spat up blood, bile, or mucus. Sometimes all at once. When she spoke again, Tombers could not believe that she sustained a long discourse, uninterrupted by her violent expulsion of bodily fluids that simply would not dry out like the other girls. She said, "One citizen avoided another; hardly any neighbor troubled about others, relatives never visit. Such terror has been struck into the hearts of men and women that brother has abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and even the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers may refuse to see and tend their children. Molly didn't know how she knew all this. Like many things, she just knew. Tombers saw their faces, calm in death. In fact, as he looked from one face to another in that vast mound of bodies, they each looked too calm, too accepting of the

death that was visited upon them. No faces frozen in terror, or anguish, or remorse. It was like they expected death and could not resist it and did not try. "Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. The cemeteries were unable to accommodate them. They found it fitting to dig the Plague Pit here, at the Guardpost remains, and dump the bodies where they believe it began. They dug this pit where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full." Her voice was beautiful even when she spoke of these horrific conditions. It had a strange echo that reminded him of dreaming. "Why are we here?" Tombers asked her. "They may come for these bodies. Nicodem or the others. To raise them. Make an army of the Plagued dead to wage their war. Can it be stopped?"

RRR Thomas Colburn had been in Malifaux for four years. He had come across the Breach in the very first wave as a prominent young Guild Guardsman. With no family tie to hold him back, he enthusiastically volunteered for extra duty and special assignments. With such passion and drive he quickly rose through officer ranks and set his sights on the elite divisions within the Guild. He had a personal fascination with the walking dead. His focus upon the Death Marshals was interestingly circumvented by Samael Hopkins, himself, who requested Officer Colburn specifically for a mission into the western Badlands, despite the dozens of volunteers that had stepped forward for the assignment. He scratched the thick stubble on his neck, limping into Malifaux and spat beside the checkpoint gate, a superstition none of the earliest pioneers forgot, and dragged his bum leg back into the City. He adjusted his wide-brimmed hat, his thick oiled duster, and the black patch across his eye. He was nervous, he had to admit. Since that incident in the Badlands three years earlier, he had not been back in the Guild enclave. He felt that the Guardsmen at the checkpoint followed his every move, but he no longer recognized a man among them and knew he was all but forgotten among those that might still be in the ranks. Malifaux chewed up and spat out too many young people eager to prove their mettle, and everyone understood that it was foolish to get close to anyone in the Guild. There was little compassion. Little friendship. He tipped his hat to the sentry at the gateway fence that separated the Guild's official buildings from the general populace. As he predicted, they stopped him from limping past. "Just a minute there, mister," one said, stepping around the wooden post beside the small checkpoint building, holding up his hand while the other rested on his holstered Peacebringer. "I'm retired Second Lieutenant Thomas Colburn," he said sternly to the Guardsmen. The two guards looked skeptical and studied the broken man before them, dragging a leg, eye patched with a jagged scar that ran the length of his entire face. Reaching for his credentials held on the inside of his dark duster, the lower two digits were missing from his hand, and a purple scar ran the length of his palm where half the hand had been torn away. They examined his paperwork, confirming his sincerity. One said, "Sorry, sir. Didn't recognize you." "No. 'Spose not. Been out of the City for some time." "Out'a the City?" They thought he must be pulling their leg. "What do you do with yourself out there, Mister Colburn?" The "mister" stung him a bit. No officer's title. "Rancher. Raise cattle. Just north'a here a ways. Not too far into the wilds, of course," he said, supporting their supposition that a broken man like him should not be off on his own outside of Guild protection. "Okay, cowboy. What brings you back in?" "I need to see Officer Hopkins as soon as possible." They laughed. "Hopkins? You want to see

Hopkins?" Colburn straightened himself the best he could but the old wound to his lower back made it difficult to stand

straight without wincing. "Stand aside now, Private," he said and moved to enter the conclave. The Guardsman stopped him. "Private?" "New regulations. Can't just saunter in off the streets and have a meeting with the likes of Samael Hopkins." "I'm an officer in good standing," he said sternly. "I'll find someone that can address me properly." "Inactive duty. Like I said, different regulations than when you were around last, I 'spect." Colburn ground his teeth. He hadn't come back to Malifaux to be turned away so easily. "We'll send your request up the pike. They'll let you know when they can see you." Another guard, hidden from his view behind the checkpoint station said quietly to another, "Haven't even seen Hopkins in months. Don't we need to report requests to see 'im?" They had Colburn wait. Soon they were escorting him through the Courthouse building adjacent to the Witch Hunter holding facility where he intended to go all along. Leaving him sitting in a stiff wooden chair for too long, his good leg tingled as the circulation was cut off, and he began to fidget uncomfortably. They had taken his pistol, of course, and his typical habits of adjusting his hat, his eyepatch, and holster were so ingrained in his movements that he jumped in brief panic every several minutes when his hand fell on dead space at his hip. He lived on his own out there, and his gun was at his side every minute, including sleep. Having it removed was as painful as losing half his hand. "I understand you've come to speak with Officer Samael Hopkins," a smooth voice emanated from the darkness surrounding the outer edges of the room. Colburn could not discern the speaker, remaining there in the shadows just beyond the dim light of the kerosene lamps suspended above the table he sat behind. Colburn had not even noticed the man enter the room, and he jumped at the voice. "Think I made that clear enough," Colburn said. "Don't need to talk to no lawyer. Need to talk to a Stalker, and one high enough so a job'll get done and not get mixed up in some paper shuffling." The man in the shadows stepped forward so that his lower legs were within the yellow light of the lamp, yet his face remained hidden in the shadows. He wore the fine leggings and stark white stockings of a lord from back across the Breach. "You'll find that I'm no mere lawyer," the man said in that low voice. "But I understand your sentiment." Colburn fidgeted uncomfortably though the man before him was little more than a dandy by his dress and mannerisms and a bit too fragile looking. Something in his demeanor struck Colburn with fear that rippled down his back though. It perplexed him. "I'm Lucius Matheson, Mister Colburn. You might have heard that I, too, appreciate getting a job done." He had heard of the mysterious Secretary. Few had ever seen him. Colburn had to wonder if his various encounters with prominent figures in Malifaux were a blessing or a curse. "I understand you're here to speak with Officer Hopkins." He could not see the Secretary's face shrouded in the shadows around him, yet he still looked away. "I see in your file, Mister Colburn, that Hopkins spoke highly of you. Quite." "Thank you," he said reluctantly. "What brings you here, looking for Hopkins?" Something beyond his understanding was afoot, and he realized he was only accidentally caught up in it. Some conflict between this imposing figure and Hopkins. "There's a problem – out on the range." "I do not see how this concerns Hopkins." "Maybe it doesn't," he had to agree. He raised his head to muster the courage to stare into the dark silhouette before him. "But it's odd. Supernatural. Even in Malifaux. Something's changed." "I do not see in your file how you became an expert on such matters." "That's why I wanted to see Hopkins. He'd believe me. He'd get the job done." Lucius Matheson remained still and silent before him, and his

discomfort grew. He fought to convince the Governor's Secretary to take his plea seriously and at least send a contingent of inspectors out to his ranch. By the end of his tale of his own animals growing belligerent beyond reason, Matheson ordered Colburn to lead him back, to show him the behavioral anomaly. There was a hint in Matheson's tone that if Colburn had not accurately conveyed the true nature of the state of affairs there, he would bear a terrible price at misleading him. Lucius listened intently to Colburn's tale. He

couldn't have known that conditions on his ranch would have grown so dire in the time it had taken to journey to the City and meet with the Secretary. At that moment, back on Colburn's ranch, one of the three ranch hands he had hired remained alive, though he cowered in the corner of the stable, pinned against the barn wall and unable to reach the fence where he might have crawled under, nor could he reach the open barn door. There would be no escape through the barn anyway. All of the cattle were in there in great numbers, clearly more comfortable in the dark than out in the light. One of the steers came closer, and he shrank further against the wall, trembling and whimpering. Its eyes were wide and the dark pupils constricted, showing more whites than they should. Although physically impossible for a cow to growl, when the beast lowed, it was a guttural and throaty reverberation that sounded more like a growl than any lowing the hand had ever heard before. It made a deep and throaty moo, and its lips were pulled away from the two rows of flat teeth. Blood dripped from around them, and it chomped, more like a wolf than a bovine would chew from side to side. Thin strands of flesh dangled wet and glistening from between its back teeth. Its lips pulled away from the teeth, crimson and slick with blood. The bovine stalked him, assessing him as prey. Another big steer, more confident than the first, lowered its head, eyes just as fierce and insane with the thirst for blood, and charged the cowering ranch hand. He screamed and covered his face with his forearms against the impending doom. The first steer knocked it aside as it charged, and it crashed into the wall beside the addled rancher. It lowed strangely at the other, regaining its footing, and they squared off, each growling a deep-throated warning to the other. Before the ranch hand's eyes, the first steer, mouth still dripping blood and frothing saliva, shook and quivered. It stomped the ground hard with its forelegs, like an tantrum. Abruptly, bony spines, long and flat, like great arrowheads, burst from its back along each vertebra. It howled, the noise echoing throughout the valley. An additional bony spike burst from each of its shoulder blades. The other cattle around the corral went through a similar transformation. The two stalking him were enraged. In a flash, they charged at one another, howling as their heads knocked violently against each other's, their long horns slashing madly at the neck and shoulders in possessive rage. More cattle circled the fray and charged the rancher, desperate for his flesh. They slammed against one another, beating their heads in explosive cracks of bone on bone. As their blood flowed they began to turn on one another, not just to exhibit dominance over their human prey, but to devour themselves. Soon, several saw the weakness and exhaustion of another and quickly had it toppled. They made short work of it, tearing its throat open with their long horns. Their faces were covered in blood from injuries and gorging. The rancher hoped to slink away from the carnage, to find refuge beyond the sturdy gates of the corral. As he fled, eyes on the insane massacre, he stopped short when the heavy puff of breath just above him fell upon his neck. He looked up into the face of one of his favorite animals on the ranch. An old boy, gentle as a kitten, always the first to comply with the rancher's herding. It huffed again. Then it raised its great head to the sky, crying in madness in the odd lowing that sounded much more like a

wolf's howl. It was the last thing the ranchhand heard. The cattle consumed the flesh of each of the ranchers but turned on one another before they could finish, enraged by their desperate thirsts for blood. Nearby carrion birds descended upon the bloodbath, eager to take advantage of the cattle's distraction for one another to pick at the visceral remains in the open. As they ate, one vulture, gorging upon the flesh dangling from a ranch hand's ribs, snapped at another, suddenly desperate to have the meat for itself. They quarreled and tore at one another and soon, more birds that had descended to the irresistible feast found themselves striking at birds or cattle, desperate to have any flesh, any blood. By the time Colburn and Lucius Matheson, his face hidden behind a full face mask, could return to the ranch to examine the "strange and territorial behavior of the livestock", the sound of the screeching and howling had subsided. The barn and corral was awash with blood and partially devoured carcasses. The dirt could not absorb the blood that pooled among the remains. Lucius was not a man taken easily by surprise. Witnessing the horrific carnage before him, he pulled his horse to a halt and surveyed the horrible scene. "What the hell?" he whispered.

His horse fidgeted. Lucius pulled it away from the ranch, and it huffed with a guttural reverberation in its throat that sounded strangely like a growl. The horses of the guardsmen accompanying them snapped at one another. The great Hanging Tree loomed above Leveticus, and he stood, bent at his midsection, looking not too dissimilar from the gnarled and ancient tree that rose in mockery of life, itself. It bore no leaves and the bark peeled, but its roots ran deep and sap still flowed when the tree was tapped, proving it still lived on, no doubt feeding upon the bones of those that had been buried around it. Leveticus stood in the depths of the great tree's early morning shadow, peering down the long sloping valley to Malifaux below. The young girl, Alyce, sat upon a square tombstone behind him, staring not at the City, but the Governor General's mansion that loomed beyond the graveyard, across the road. She was contemplating how difficult it would be to take out the guards assigned there and make off with the fortune she was sure it housed. "Do you feel it, girl?" he asked, his voice dry and taut. Alyce said, "What, the cold? Yeah, it's making my skin crawl." "No, not the cold. The feeling of inevitability?" "Does it feel like boredom? If so, then yes. I feel it." He chuckled, and the long white brows above his narrow eyes lifted. "Not that, either. Can you sense that something's not right?" "Oh, you mean how you've kept me out all night looking down at the City and at a bunch of houses out beyond the City, too, and now I'm tired? I agree. It's not right." He thought she'd be able to sense it like he did. Her arm was not the only part of her that had been replaced; wires and mechanika ran deep into her and attached at various points to her spine and up into her brain. He thought that by now she'd be closer to death, to sense it more like he did. He could not teach her about it as he had expected. She was far too willful, too attached to life to feel the barrier of death pressing upon her. He could feel the buzz in his prosthetic leg and arm of brass, copper, and iron. But deep within his chest, where his heart had once been, he felt it most. "Death," he said flatly. "It's all around." "Good observation. We're in the cemetery. Under the Tree. There's death all around, all right." "Why must you be so willfully disobedient?" he asked, but he loved her combative nature. Her passion was so starkly contrasted against his stoic and disinterested demeanor. "Why's your doohickey glowing?" she asked. He lifted his staff so that the green stone attached to the end of it was directly before his face. It glowed faintly. He nodded and sighed. "It usually does this when I'm about to die," he said casually.

