

December 18 Sonnia Criid bent her head against the cold pouring down from the mountains in the distance. She pulled the wide brim of her hat down to her shoulder to shelter her face from a biting wind she had never before experienced. It was severe, even for early December, and stung the back of her hand, pricking the flesh with sharp jabs. Small flakes flew sideways, but it was too dry in the badlands for any great accumulation. The snow came down from out of the Northern Mountains, and a single dark cloud swirled ominously over one tall peak in the distance, stretching out far overhead in a sky lit occasionally with lightning. She walked from the town, her duster fastened tight around her torso, but the ends snapped sharply behind her. The heels of her boots dug into the hard soil, gray and cracked from endless years of abuse by the cold dry wind that beat constantly against it. Sparse vegetation managed to eke out a meager existence, stretching up feebly between wide cracks in the hard soil. Samael Hopkins approached her, his head bowed with one gloved hand holding his hat upon his head. His own duster was heavy with the oil that weatherproofed it, but it snapped toward her as the wind raged at his back. A bandana hid his features, leaving only his eyes exposed to the elements. Even the horse he led, Cinder, looked dejected and miserable and kept its head low while its mane and tail whipped in the wind. "Any luck?" she called, voice rising above the moaning wind. "Yeah," he shouted back, leaning toward her. "But you're not going to like it!" She drew close to him, and they returned to Redemption City, a mere six buildings and another dozen or so makeshift homes situated beyond the small town's perimeter. Samael looked ahead at the thick black smoke rising above one of the poorly constructed houses. "Is that Old Man Milner's place burnin'?" She shouted back, "Yeah. But I didn't do it!" Samael had a habit of accusing her of starting every fire he saw, so she beat him to the punch. The look on his face conveyed the somber attitude that typically showed only during the hunt or apprehension of a criminal. "Volcanic activity spread out here? That's a bigger circle'n you predicted." "It's moving all through this area. Beneath us. The surface gave way out there beyond the Weiland home. You can see the lava flowing below. Like a river rapids." He moved nearer to her as they walked, for the hope of warmth and to hear one another better. "Maybe I can warm my hands and toes by it!" he called, feigning a smile. After Hopkins sheltered Cinder in the livery, he joined Sonnia in the abandoned General Store she had converted to her private study. The walls were more solidly constructed than other buildings around them, allowing only a bit of the wind to whistle through gaps between the planks. She had a large mug of hot coffee ready for them both. "Milner's place just collapsed," he said, taking the dented metal cup from her and sipping at it thankfully. Although she made it too bitter, too strong, he wasn't going to complain. "They make it out okay?" he asked. "Yesterday. Took off before sun up. Before their place caught fire." "Anyone left? Wadsworths? Cunninghams?" "Nope. The Schadles left just after you and the Milners convinced the Wadsworths to go with them." Samael nodded, slapping and rubbing his upper arm to get some life moving in them again. "So we're all that's left? The Hopkins and the Criids? So much for Redemption City. How long has it been here?" "Just under two years. When that soulstone vein was discovered." "Two years and now abandoned." He shook his head.

"Not exactly their decision," she said as the ground rumbled, shaking up through the shoddily constructed building. Bottles and cans on the store's shelves wobbled and slipped from their perch with a clatter. The ground growled a long, deep rumble from the heart of the small abandoned town. It subsided as the two waited it out, looking at one another, expecting

the worst. "Tell me what you found out there," she said as the goods along the wall stopped tinkling against one another. "Nothing you didn't tell me I'd find." "You said, 'I'm not going to like it.' You find the entrance to the pit?" "Oh, yep. Found the cave entrance. Goes down into a pretty elaborate labyrinth of twisting caves. Can't figure it out by walking randomly, either. Didn't go too far as you instructed, though I'm sure I could have found my way out." "You'd be surprised. I don't think it's a natural labyrinth and natural confusion I'm worried about. Otherwise, you'd have no trouble, I'm sure. There should be markings on the entrance walls. A code or some part of the key." "It's there. How I knew it was your cave. Marks are old, but don't look entirely Neverborn, neither, though I'm sure they had to be." "Go on. I can tell there's more. The part I'm not going to like. What are you holding back?" He smiled and shook his head. "Well, like I said, you ain't gonna like it. Some of those ancient symbols and glyphs and such weren't the only things written on the walls. In fact, parts of those old symbols were scratched off and new writing was there." "Damn it." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Did you write it down?" "Much as I could. Got some written down here," he said, pulling the narrow journal from within his long coat. He unfolded it and opened the book to his drawings of the cave. "Mostly matches the drawings in one of the books you had me retrieve from your office. You still owe me for that one, by the way. Matheson nearly caught me snooping about." "Owe you? You didn't get half the books I sent you for and not the one book I really needed." "Cause he followed me right into the Investigator's offices. Dropped your damned book right on Hoffman's lap! I swear that Secretary looked right at me as he walked over to that monster, Ryle. Looked right at me. Froze my damned blood. You know how tough it'd be if they caught me. You're not exactly in their good graces, you know." "Sorry you're in it with me. Can't trust any of them anymore." "Not Lucius Matheson, that's for sure. Guy gives me the creeps." "Not our beloved Governor, either, I fear," she said, and emotion seemed to drain from her face as her eyes focused on something far away. Her countenance took on that strange introspective look every time the Governor's name came up, but she wouldn't reveal what she knew or suspected. She was holding something in, that was certain. "Anyway," Samael said, "I didn't write down all of them," as he tapped his drawing there in the book. She looked at him quizzically. "They're not appropriate for ladies' eyes." He winked at her. "Me? Not appropriate for me? As if I've not heard it all from the number of felons we've apprehended. Especially those we've purged." "True. Burning a man's spirit out does seem to encourage a most foul discourse." She read the first graffiti image Hopkins had copied, realizing it was a limerick verse, I knew a woman on Malifaux's streets Who swallowed a handful of seeds Within half an hour Her breasts were a flower And her knickers were covered in weeds. Finishing it she said, "Rude, crass, and not terribly clever." She read another:

Per'aps you're wishing to die, Ma'am? Down your throat my cane I could cram. Your question's quite rude Asked of my streetwalker brood- "Are they any real threat?" – Well I am! Following that she said, "Limericks about a 'Streetwalker brood' leads me to believe it's that lunatic –" "Seamus," Hopkins said, interjecting. "He actually signed the wall with his name in one limerick which I hesitated to even bring up. It says something about 'Me and my girl Molly / befouled this cave with –', well, I needn't go on with more of his rude verse. Suffice it to say that he was happy enough to let us know he was there and what he and Molly did while there. Made me anxious to get out, even into the blistering cold. She didn't hear him. She was staring beyond him as she often did, eyes darting as her mind raced. He knew what would

likely come next. Well, one of several possibilities. She'd either get so obsessed by some obscure detail, calling it a "symbol of providence" and pour through book after ancient book day and night without eating or sleeping. Or she was about to go off on some fool adventure, nearly get them both killed, all to track down yet another lost book in some Neverborn ruins. Or, what she hated most but suspected was most likely, she'd send him off on some dangerous mission while she re-read or translated an arcane text. He sipped his coffee and pushed his hat further back on his head, peering at her from the depth of the shadows it cast upon his countenance. Her eyes came to rest on his. "I have a mission for you," she said. So, the third option. It's what he guessed. "Of course you do, darlin'. Back to the cave?" "No. Back to the City." Something was different about her demeanor, he thought. She masked it well. But he was too experienced in finding the most minute detail and using it to make bold understandings about his prey. She looked at him almost regretfully, like they were saying goodbye. To her credit, she was fairly convincing. He was better at seeing through obscurity. "That book Lucius dropped on Hoffman's lap. It's important enough. About grafting, of all things. Hooking up mechanika to the body. Something I'm overlooking. Get me that book, Sam." There was more to her story that she wasn't sharing. He was certain. "Meet back here?" She hesitated, which added to his unease. The ground rumbled again, and they heard a spout of lava erupt from just north of the town. It seemed to spark an idea, and she said, "I don't think Redemption City will last that long. I'll meet you back at the secret apartment I keep in the Quarantine Zone. Day after tomorrow." "Fine," he said. "What about you, though? Volcanic activity's gettin' stronger. From here all the way to the cave." She smiled. "Sam," she said. "I'm not worried about the heat. It's the cold that worries me." She winked and waved him off, seeming too anxious to get back to deciphering the Neverborn text they had recovered from some Arcanist patsy months earlier. So it was, late in the evening, that he set out to return to Malifaux on her bidding. He rode late, anxious to get free from the howling wind but also to put the pieces together to explain her odd behavior there before he left. She relied upon him for his tracking, but he was shrewd and didn't need much to go on in order to figure out a mystery. It was hours into his trek that he spun Cinder and dug his spurs into the stallion's flanks, hightailing it back to their makeshift camp in Redemption. It had been nearly five hours since he had left and, bursting into the dark space of the general store, found it abandoned, as he feared. A glance at the dwindling embers confirmed to him that the fire had not been tended for exactly the length of time he had been gone. He spun in place, taking in the missing goods from the store, comparing discrepancies of what he now beheld against the nearly perfect image of the place from when he last stood there. The small changes were clear in the mental snapshot that so perfectly remembered every minute detail. Basic rations, rope, lantern, survival knife. Her stack of books was missing only two, including the journal he gave her with the writings on the cave wall scribbled within. Most of her own notes were there as well. An envelope rested upon one of the books she had kept of the translations of many of the arcane symbols and glyphs regarding the coming return of the Tyrant Entities. It was what consumed her and drove her. The Tyrants. The envelope was not addressed but the backbone Sonnia's wax seal symbol of the flaming serpent. It was dry and cool, but still soft as he cracked it. The letter therein read:

You never could follow orders. My guess is that you didn't get more than an hour before returning here, suspicious of something I said or did that 'didn't sit right'. Your instincts are strong. But, unless you catch me writing this letter, then you'll be too late. You'll still need to

get that book to corroborate some of my findings in my journal. Turn yourself in to Matheson, too. Explain what I've done and how you didn't have anything to do with it. Offer my work as proof of your loyalty to the Guild. You'll need to take control of the Witch Hunters. If I'm right I'll soon either be dead (as I now fear and suspect) or I will have seriously pissed off one of the greatest Tyrants known to us. Either way, I plan to buy you time, at least, to figure out how to stop them. You must search for an answer, Samael, and I trust no man to find anything more than I trust you. Godspeed, -SPS: Be wary of Lucius Matheson. He's more than he seems. He opened the gate in the front of the potbelly stove, cooling as the embers within diminished. The parchment of her letter flared up briefly as the embers consumed it. Within moments he was back atop Cinder, riding the unhappy animal hard. He rode throughout the night, stopping only as he must to give Cinder water and a brief moment to catch his breath. He hated to push him right to the very edge of death, but such was his need for haste. "Hold in there, boy," he said as the City drew into sight beneath the uncanny orange glow of the twin moons overhead. The sun was about to break in the east as he slowed to a canter. He'd have to avoid the checkpoint into the City. He would retrieve that book from Hoffman, however it was not a book he was urgent to find, but a man. A man that was all too good at not being found. A man that just might have the answer Sonnia had been looking for. He was after Seamus. CCC Shortly thereafter and in a different part of the city, Seamus stood before the great plague pit, a mound of bodies piled high in the Quarantine Zone, smiling as in a sinister smile as he surveyed the hundreds of victims that had succumbed to the Plague these past months. Molly stood apart from him, in the distance, watching him from between crumbling buildings in the dark shadows. He was not without escort, however, as three of his favorite Belles stood nearby, mouths agape, eyes and heads lolling this way and that as they entertained whatever meager thoughts might still be possible in their addled brains. They were not dressed for the evening; however, as Seamus was on a very important mission, and one that might change his destiny forever, perhaps even the fate of all of those in Malifaux. Flung unceremoniously upon the mound of bodies were the Guild Guardsmen stationed at the Plague Pit. Other than slit throats or deep lacerations from a Belle's dirty fingernails, they wore only their red thermal drawers, relieved of their attire to dress his girls appropriately for their most serious mission. One girl wore the pants, boots (though one kept managing to fall off for it was several times too large for the slight Belle), and long gray coat of a Guild Guardsman while another wore the more austere business attire of an investigator. More Guards lay nearby, and Seamus didn't care to have them brought to the pit nor even stripped to hide their

identity. Molly urged greater discretion, but he was agitated with that particular group of Guardsmen. In their midst rested a full-fledged Death Marshal, now face down upon his mysterious coffin, a supernatural gateway to the aether-world. Seamus could hardly go near the thing even though one of his favorites, Juliana Myrtlebeck, was still trapped within the coffin. Seamus glanced to the third of his companions whom he now pretended was his own Death Marshal consort. He could not bring himself to fully disrobe the real Guild Marshal, wanting instead to keep his distance even though he fired more than half a dozen rounds into his body before quickly pulling his duster, dripping with blood from the merciless assault, and put it over the girl's soiled evening gown. He decided that a hat stuck on her head and a pistol strapped tightly around her waist fulfilled the illusion well enough. He pulled the withered daisy from his lapel and stuffed the dry stem through a wet bullet-hole in the front of the coat. It

was stiff and freezing quickly. He called her "sir" and saluted whenever she passed him, ambling about with the air of importance, or so he pretended. He had Molly dressed as a librarian, despite her persistent reluctance to join him and the other Belles. She was supposed to record the event, and he spent hours showing her how to use the lead pencil he wedged between her gray fingers. "You lick the pencil like this," he showed her, licking the lead, "and then start scribbling." She didn't respond, but she looked right at him. It was an odd thing for his girls to focus their eyes upon him, and he didn't really like it. "You were a reporter, right?" he asked of her, time and again. "That's why ye're the one that's reporting this momentous event. Aye!" he exclaimed. "Ye daft garl," he muttered under his breath. "I swear ye are being difficult on purpose." "Kelly," he called to his Death Marshal Belle. She shuffled quickly to him as he bent forward, eyes darting back and forth conspiratorially. He motioned for her to remain silent even though she had never uttered a sound since her resurrection. "I have a mission for ye, bonny lass!" he whispered loudly. "That cowboy, Samael be nearby. Scroungin' and looking for one such as me. See to it he finds his way here in short order. I'm in need of him. There's a good lass!" He turned toward Molly, still standing aloof, curious about her behavior toward him. She was a strange one, even by his eccentric standards. He shouted to her, "He sure took the bait, Molly-girl! Just like I told ye he would!" His smile was broad. "Be in for a big surprise when 'e comes round the corner, though, aye?" She didn't answer. He shrugged. He went back to examining the great pile of bodies, inhaling deeply the sickly sweet smell of decaying flesh that made most men wretch. Molly knew what he was doing, what he intended. She wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. Still, Seamus had better intentions than Nicodem might, with the masses of decaying bodies piled right there in the open. Of course, the plague had ravaged much of their bodies, continuing to devour flesh and tissue even after the victim had fallen. Some of the bodies almost fully liquefied on the inside as the plague left only a black tar-like substance in its vile wake. Some of the handlers of the victims would grab hold of the arms or legs to fling the body upon the pile only to have it burst like a balloon and splatter its dark contents upon them. They would find themselves on the pile within days, sometimes hours. So, if Nicodem had considered building an army of the damned from the plague victims, perhaps he had thought it not worth the time to pick and choose viable corpses from the rotting masses. Or perhaps he did not want to risk the proximity of a plague that could devour flesh with such potency and impunity. Seamus either hadn't considered the danger or didn't care. Maybe both. "This is the spot," he said as he finished the fifth pass around the mound. "Riiiiight here." The sky above grew very dark. The wind howled and their coats and dresses snapped in the gale. Then it went suddenly still. The cold that had descended upon Malifaux these last months seemed at first to draw toward that mound of corpses, localizing upon them. The girls didn't seem to mind, and Seamus was too preoccupied to care, though his fingers were red and numb and his boots did little to stave off the cold. Then, as the wind died, the temperature jumped, bathing the entire area in a throbbing beat of increasing warmth. The thick frost upon the cobblestones and corpses evaporated in one of those pulses, the heat coming in those steady waves as if carried upon a strange heartbeat that enveloped them all. "You better be writing this down, Molly!" he called to her. Snow that lingered in along the drainage culverts adjacent the dilapidated sidewalks and forgotten buildings turned to a foggy steam that snaked its way up and around them and the corpses. At their feet where the steam began, it first thickened with that strange throbbing heartbeat and then became opaque, enveloping their legs from the knees downward. As the sky above grew as dark as night, the light gray

steam about their feet coalesced, writhing around them as if monstrous snakes, and it, too, darkened to black.

Seamus concentrated upon that pulsing rhythm, knowing that to any other normal man walking about it would feel as though only some strange heat wave had descended upon that one lone spot within the otherwise blistering cold that blanketed all of Malifaux. Seamus could feel far more. He could feel the infinite masses of spiritual energy that called to him, not from the bodies of the recently dead, but from beyond the thin boundary that separated this world from the aether. These spirits lingered, lost in the void and unsure where to go, for they were not from this world and their spirits did not know in death what they might have known in life. They were a beacon for the other, older spirits. And they came to this spot, fueling Seamus. It was the Event, just months ago, that unlocked the great gate that kept the worlds separate. The Breach was the first unnatural tear between worlds, and the Fiery Cage was a stab through the ethereal barrier, not to Earth, but directly into the realm of shadow and twilight. The unleashed power of that spiritual energy remained in Malifaux, and Seamus reached out with his will, collecting it to him, feeling the gossamer edges of that surreal power with the outstretched arms of his mind. The tingling energy was both very familiar, akin to the breaking of a soulstone, but also foreign because it was constant and much stronger. Where the rush of a soulstone was fleeting, this power was dizzying and assaulted his every sense, filling him with power so that he felt as though his flesh might not sustain it. Seamus was filled with the dark energy and approached rapture, finding it more and more difficult to perceive the reality in which his body stood, seeing only into that purple world beyond with thrilling flashes of multi-colored stabs through the shifting void. He hardly cared about his old reality, longing to enter the world beyond where sensation of that rapturous absorption of a Soulstone might be his, eternally, at every moment. His arms thrust out to his sides, palms and face lifted to the heavens, the inky tendrils lifted him from the rough paving stones, stained by the spilled contents of the plague victims. The darkness became substantial, squeezing him, embracing him, filling him with energy beyond his comprehension. "Yes!" he howled, and his eyes popped open, now black, mirroring the black tendrils that embraced his lower body. "Come, Death! Come!" It was the fearsome Grave Spirit, an ancient Tyrant Entity thought to have the least influence or desire to walk upon Malifaux again. Only at places rich in death, with a tenuous gateway to the aether-world, such as the shrine at Kythera, could he even be communicated with. Or so it was assumed. Seamus had researched the issue well, driven more and more insane with each dark passage he read. But the Event had awakened in him a greater understanding of the power unleashed upon them all. He gathered it, and in such a place where innumerable spirits lingered and were drawn from the other side, the mighty Spirit could be called. It was at that moment that Kelly, the Belle that Seamus had sent to lure Samael to him, bound around the corner of a building with a loping gate, the warm steam rising quickly around her bare feet. Samael Hopkins, following quickly behind, slid to a halt beside a partially toppled wall perpendicular to the alley in which Molly stood. His eyes darted from one image to another, and he understood at once what was occurring before him. Samael had witnessed nearly the same event not half a year earlier at the Kythera remains. He remembered with distinct clarity the sensation of fear and awe that had consumed him then and felt it again now. Others, weaker of will than him and Sonnia, though still strong, succumbed to the madness that lashed into their spirits with the inevitable sensation of eternal death and damnation. He struggled against it again, feeling

only the need to flee, to escape that which gathered before him and could not be escaped. It was Death. The great Tyrant Entity, the Grave Spirit, gathered and as It grew in strength, focusing Its will to this reality once more, Samael's will wavered as the great spirit sought dominion. Barely able to concentrate, it was a feat nothing short of miraculous that Hopkins focused the fear down deep in the center of his chest and channeled it out through his arm. His Colt barked before him, and a bullet trailed fire as it struck the first Belle in the center of her back, exploding on impact and punching a hole through her the size of a cannon ball. The bullet continued on, striking a second Belle in the shoulder, which set her aflame. The first fell in smoldering remains, and the second looked upon Samael emotionlessly though her clothing and dry flesh burned. Still held aloft by the manifestation of the Grave Spirit more and more imminent, Seamus turned his head toward Samael and muttered, "Right on time, boyo," though no one could hear him. The dark mist enveloping the entire area drew quickly toward Seamus, circling his legs in increasingly rapid

swirling arcs. It pulled away from Hopkins and began to take on a hulking form as screams from beyond the grave filled the air. Hopkins knew his sanity was teetering on collapse. He had seen those other men at Kythera break, their minds shattered by the mere presence of the Grave Spirit as It only began to take presence in this world. It brought with It the stain of damnation, showing an unholy and eternal realm of unbridled suffering and anguish. That stain washed over him now, the vapor writhing at his feet. He would soon be lost to the great macabre imagery, he realized, his body, instinctively trying to overrule his will, took several steps away, back into the alley that brought him here. The momentum of that movement was nearly enough. He would flee, he realized, and they would be lost, but he could not leave with the prophetic imagery of his own tortured existence beneath the Tyrant that would enslave them all and feed upon their lost spirits invading his confused mind. Hardly able to discern his own reality, he withdrew a set of shackles from his belt with trembling hands. He quickly clamped one to his wrist and the other end to a dark iron gate still anchored to a brick wall with a thin chain and lock he would use on the arrest of a criminal. He needed to flee and could not control the urge. He jerked and tugged at the chains he trapped himself with until blood flowed at his wrist, irrationally crying in fear as a schoolchild might. Samael lifted his Colt but could not aim, could barely focus his will into the weapon but knew as the bullet flew that it carried the full weight of his arcane will and trailed white fire as it sought Seamus' chest. Its trajectory was true, but as it entered his flesh, the energy enveloping his bullet changed from yellowish-white to bright green and hit Seamus full in the chest and passed through him. The energy rippled out his back like a pebble dropped into a still pool, ingrowing circles to dissipate far above and beyond him. "YES," Seamus growled, his voice a strange echoing mixture of his natural voice commingled with the Grave Spirit. "ALMOST DONE, BOYO," he said from across the distance to Samael. "NOW GIVE US A LITTLE MINUTE. I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING." He struck his head violently. As the ripple of energy finally dissipated fully, Seamus grasped his head, his fingernails growing into thick claws that tore into the flesh, his large top hat knocked from the thick red curls of his head, now turning raven black. "NOW, NOW. SETTLE DOWN, YE BASTARD. NONE OF THAT." Samael understood he was speaking not to him, but to the entity consuming him and his mind. The black tendrils holding him aloft had jerked away from where his bullet's energy had penetrated Seamus and finally pulled from him entirely, joining into one great black arm that stretched up and above him. His body twisted as he fell to the ground, and he bellowed in

pain and laughed hysterically, maniacally. He rose to his knees and his back bulged and split the green woolcoat in several long lacerations. Where the dark mist of the Grave Spirit touched, color drained away, leaving his clothing dark gray and his skin lost its warmth, turning ashen and strange as his arms and legs bulged and thickened in incredible muscular growth and the bones beneath them clearly snapped, broken by his transformation. "NO, NO!" he shouted. "WON'T BE ENOUGH," he roared. His head shook, sending blood flying in wide arcs as he flailed his head repeatedly against the ground "WON'T BE ENOUGH TO BEAT US!" He shook and pounded his meaty fists upon the ground which split the stones. "LET US THINK, YE DAMNED SPIRIT." He turned to face Samael, growling incoherently. He spat and snarled, reduced to more of a mindless brute than a man. The dark tendril that was the Grave Spirit reared high above and prepared to strike like a viper. Abruptly, the massive head snapped to the side, facing Samael. His eyes were consumed by the blackness of the stain of damnation, reflecting no light. He laughed maniacally. "SHOOT ME! SHOOT ME IF YOU'RE GONNA!" he bellowed. "RIGHT IN THE HEAD IF YOU'RE GOING TO AT ALL!" Seamus laughed maniacally, his voice echoing strangely even within his own throat. Samael, barely conscious as his mind reeled with unreasoning fear, assaulted by endless imagery of what could only be described as hell, had his weapon leveled as well as he could upon the brute that was Seamus, his clothing hanging upon his muscular back in tatters, the gun shaking. Samael swallowed hard and with eyes closed, let another bullet fly. Seamus, now a towering monstrosity, growled in unison with the roar of the gun, and the bullet struck him in the head just as the black tendril lashed downward to burrow into Seamus. Both struck Seamus' head, the bullet a fraction of a second ahead of the dark tendril, and the black grave vapors blew out in a puff, denied the mind of Seamus as Hopkins ended him. The blackness lightened to gray as the mist froze over, and the dark cloud above slowly broke to reveal the cool

blue beyond as Seamus fell to the ground, his body twisting and writhing back to its normal humanity even as his life expired. A great pool of blood radiated from the gaping hole at the back of his head. His dead eyes returned to normal, save the color. They were no longer the deep green that so many women found irresistible. Now, stained by the Grave Spirit that withered away, they were pale gray.