

October 6 The bayou was strangely quiet and still. Lilith brushed aside a branch, heavy with frost, and walked across the thin film of ice covering the murky water. The ice could not have supported the weight of any normal person or beast, but it gave her little concern. Even the long blades of grass, covered in a sheath of white, hardly swayed at her passing. No footprint on the soft, still unfrozen, soil marked her movement through the marsh. The bayou gave her, Zoraida, and many of the Neverborn natives shelter because the humans found it so difficult to navigate and remember their way. Only the damnable Ortegas seemed willing to hunt through the wetlands, and they were increasingly proficient at navigating the difficult region. Of course, that was before the Event. Since the Red Star fell, the Ortegas were strangely absent from the bayou and the somewhat dryer forests north of it near their own compound. Lilith's breath froze in a fog before her as she paused to survey the surroundings. She chastised herself for allowing her mind to wander, brief though it was. Thinking of the Ortegas distracted her, and this close to Zoraida's hut, she knew that even she could not afford to lose focus. The three thorn elms were to her left as they should be, but the bayou's single towering Jasmine, supposed to be to the right of them, was nowhere to be seen. She cursed silently. Where was the Jasmine tree? Rare and fragile in normal conditions, its thriving in the bayou was an impossibility that fortunately marked the last stage of the journey to Zoraida's hidden home. She scanned the foliage in each direction from the three thorn elms and even stepped side to side to see if they were hidden by other trees. Especially with their branches weighted by the frost, she thought the landmarks might be further obscured than normal. She couldn't see it. But then, the scent of the jasmine flowers caught her, sweet and soft. She looked up. Looming directly above her stood the jasmine tree, its tiny flowers white and gleaming in the frost that would surely wither them. She cursed again, blaming only herself for falling into Zoraida's trap. She spun, rethinking her position in the swamp and saw with her mind rather than her eyes, for they were never to be trusted this close to Zoraida's shack. She thought of a position more than fifty yards behind her where both the three elms would stand to her left and the jasmine to her right and in between would be the hut. Sure enough, past the thin trunk of the flowering tree, there before her were the thick stilts that raised the hut above the water of the swamp that rose and fell so severely by the passing of Malifaux's moons. Sighing as she stepped past the tree, she had to acknowledge Zoraida's power once more. To other Neverborn, Lilith was known as "The Master of Malifaux", able to bend and reshape nature to fit her needs. But Zoraida's power confounded her, and not for the first time. Humans had been in Malifaux only four short years, but they told tales of Zoraida that made her somehow more feared than either Lilith or even Pandora, even though Zoraida had tormented the humans far less than either of the two seemingly younger Neverborn women. Odd, too, that only a few of the settlers had even come into contact with her in the swamp, and she had left them each alive. Lilith found it remarkable that she held such power of fear over them. They told tales of the hut of the witch that walked the marsh on giant chicken legs and how the hag was so evil that she wanted to steal all the children away and eat them up. Of course, that was a tale of warning the more cruel of the adults told their children to keep them from going into the forest or swamp. It was sinister, and she was sure Pandora exploited that fear when she could. The hut did not walk about on its own. That would be ridiculous, but for anyone that found the hut once, it could certainly seem that it must be able to walk away if you tried to find it again and never could. That was her power. She turned a person's thoughts against them, turning them away from the hut in confusion. Lilith thought she only had a brief thought of the Ortegas but realized now that Zoraida's formidable hex

probably had her repeat the same thought over and over as she walked past the three elms and nearly past the Jasmine. She smiled. She would have walked right past those stilts without ever looking up to see the hut, thinking them trees as they had thick vines and grasses growing over them.

She didn't take her eyes from the stilts suspending the hut above the dark soil of a mound just below it. She thought only of Zoraida and the subject of their meeting. It should have taken only a few moments to traverse the final distance between her and the hut, but it seemed to take much longer. Zoraida's voice called out from a rocking chair near the edge of the rickety porch. "Ah, right on time!" she called. "Didn't get turned around in the swamp, did you?" She cackled, high and grating. Lilith knew the old woman had watched her approach with glee. Probably focused even more of her mystical twisting of the obfuscation against her. Zoraida, no doubt, reveled in the confusion she could impose on a powerful being such as herself. Lilith wrapped the fabric of spiritual energy around herself, thicker here in the swamp where life and death occurred in far greater magnitude than in the City where man denounced, even suppressed the natural ebb and flow of those energies. There was a reason they said she was the Master of Malifaux. She extended her will and found one of the dark crows perched on the rail just beyond the old woman. In a snap, she and the crow were transposed, shifting in space. The crow fluttered in surprise where Lilith had been, and Lilith, now on the rail beside Zoraida, leaning against a support post with one leg outstretched said, "Not at all," in answer to Zoraida's question which made the old woman jump and shriek. Wide-eyed, she turned to Lilith and, regaining her wits and realizing what Lilith had done, cackled again, her laughter loud and echoing throughout the swamp around them. For one such as Lilith, Zoraida seemed to age before her eyes, wrinkling, withering, and dying with every breath. It had been only several months since she had last sat with the crone, yet Zoraida seemed so different to her—tired and weak. It was such a shame that so much power could be contained in something so brief and fragile. Not for the first time did she marvel at how a human could rise up so quickly to amass a power rivaling her own. "Winter has come early to the Bayou," Lilith said as the hag's laughter subsided. "Yes. And it's quieted the croaking frogs." "Will they survive the cold?" "This?" Zoraida said, waving her gnarled hand, coarse and calloused on the fingertips and across the thick pad of her open palm. "No, the coming storm." Zoraida grew grave, thinking on it and looking out into the darkness of the swamp. "Oh," she said, "They'll suffer. They're not ready. This cold should be a month off at least. Silurids, frogs, the 'gators. The gremlins, too. They follow the seasons and prepare for the next. Always on the future, the instincts are. I'd predict they'd suffer too greatly in the storm that comes. But they adapt. If they trust those instincts." She drew the worn pelt around her torso, already wrapped in several layers of old canvas she used to construct her many dolls from. "It's a shame," Lilith said. "It's not their fault, and they'll suffer the most. The humans, holed up and cozy in Malifaux, will hardly notice that the cold came earlier than normal. That it's more severe than in previous years. Will they know of December at all?" Zoraida rocked quietly, thinking on it, looking out into the swamp that protected her. She might be safe from an accidental visit from humans stumbling upon her, but December was different. Each of the Tyrant Entities posed a very real threat for they would consume everything. Lilith continued, saying, "A Rider has come. A Dead Rider, from out of the Necropolis." "Yes. And it wasn't the first." Lilith was surprised. "One came to me. Before the Event. Its sword glowed like the sun but could not penetrate the depth of the

shadowbeneath its cowl even when it held the sword beneathits face. It spoke, but I could not understand it andthought, at first, it had come to slay me. It stood beforeme for only a minute, maybe two. The sword changedas it spoke, reflecting a sun on its surface that passed inseconds rather than hours. Even starlight and the twinmoons reflected on its surface as it spoke, though it wasmid-morning and the sky was obscured by the trees and a thick fog that surrounded us.”“I was not aware that the Hooded Rider had come,”Lilith admitted. “I always assumed it would come to me.It was foretold that it would come to the Neverborn, soit might as well have come to you.”“I am not Neverborn,” Zoraida said.“Semantics. You are in spirit.”

“Not in blood.”“Yet the Hooded Rider came to you. Why does it stir,now?” she asked.Zoraida shared her bewilderment, clicking her tongueas she thought. “I’ve spent many hours since ourencounter scrying on that. It came with Plague,awakened when It consumed that vile human thatfound it in the Necropolis. I told you we should havewalled It up better.” Zoraida looked at heraccusationally. “You did. You also agreed that we had taken enoughprecautions to secure the Necropolis. You protected itjust as you did your hut, here.”“True. No human could have found it by walkingtoward it, even by accident. The hex would have turnedthem.”“Yet man found a way. The riot, the burning buildingthat fell. It carried the human straight to Plague in thewater, filled with man’s own waste and filth. Youbelieved we would stop the coming of the end.”Zoraida nodded. “We have twisted the threads of Fateuntil they are knotted. First, the Tyrants, of course, thenus. Now the humans. With each that I unravel it seemsI create four more. Man did not find a way to bring theend – Fate did. We cannot control it. Cannot stop it.How could any man even have survived that deluge inthe sewer? Battered for miles beneath the water likethat. Could you have, Lilith? No, Fate is active and alive.It has brought the end despite our meager attempts tosway it.”“Man meddles with the power haphazardly. Almostreveling in the ability to twist Fate. They knot it. Did youmake a mistake in opening the Breach again?”“Hard to say,” Zoraida said, thinking on it. “Their worldcrumbles in decay, the spirit sucked dry. But man is asresilient and full of life as the creatures in this swamp.”She smiled, making the connection. “And if they cantrust their instincts, perhaps change all of this.”“Or they bring the end.”“Yes. Perhaps. December stirred, and when the Breachopened, He rose, finding a vessel in that girl. Plague,too, rose through man.”Lilith added, “And that lunatic, Seamus, actually triedto raise the Grave Spirit. Now the fabric surroundingthis world has been torn. Spirits are no longer trappedon the other side. The Plagued nearly succeeded inascending.”Zoraida dismissed the notion with a wave. “He’ssimple-minded. He didn’t know what he was doing.Didn’t consider the power of the other Tyrants to keep him from succeeding. Especially the Grave Spirit. It’s awily one, that’s for sure. I sense Its hand in thwartingthe Plagued. The Resurrectionists are so dangerousbecause they don’t even understand the power rightat their fingertips. Haven’t even thought about thespiritual power because they’re so trapped by theirown perception of self in the physical.”“That may change now.”“Yes. The Three Kingdoms girl. They may figure it out.They’re just so used to thinking that the men are thestronger of the genders. Imagine if Fate had given thePlague you or that damned Ortega girl?” Zoraida rolledher eyes.“Plague was stopped. But the others continue to riseand meddle in the affairs of man. The Red Star hasfallen, releasing the imprisoned.”Zoraida rocked gently, stroking the head of one of hermakeshift dolls. Lilith found it amusing that it seemedto hug her hand as she pet it. “It has already chosen avessel, too, I fear.”Lilith

nodded in agreement. "Volcanic activity in the Badlands to the west." "The Badlands? I wasn't expecting that. What's left in the Badlands for Him?" Lilith laughed. "You? Taken by surprise? So this cloud has a silver lining, after all!" Zoraida smiled, too. "Everything is clouded. Hard to read." "So, will she stop the Red Prisoner or help him ascend? We thought that Daw's sacrifice would strengthen the dam and hold them all at bay. Daw is perpetual. Always teetering between this world and that. But it was not enough. I fear your gamble has only made the end come sooner."

"I've been trying to tell you, Lilith. Fate is alive. Our presence may have awakened the slumbering Tyrant earlier than you expected, but your attempts to keep them asleep, imprisoned, was nearing an end as the Neverborn numbers began to swell again. They exist where there is life. And they wish to ascend as they always have. To fulfill their desire for immortality, godhood. If not for the humans, we would have brought them and fought them alone. Consider the changes to the Silurid and Gremlin over the last several hundred years. The vegetation, too. I think the gamble was necessary." "The humans are strong. They embrace change so quickly. But their power is being used by the Tyrants." "We will find those strong enough to oppose them." "Pandora's part. Speaking of which... why is she not here?" "More twisting of Fate's threads. She must deal with Candy. Another surprise. Another obstacle. Who could have seen this coming? Candy was not ready to grow. Not for many decades. She could have been such a powerful tool and resource. That damned Event. It wasn't supposed to come so soon." "She is still powerful. Still useful." "But not in control. Not of herself and certainly not by us. She's like your sister." Lilith winced, ashamed at the mention of Nekima. Zoraida continued, "She revels in the pain she inflicts. She loses sight of her purpose. We need the humans alive. We need them strong, not broken." "The Breach is another abomination," Lilith said. "Twisting the natural law. Every time we've sought to fix it, to repair the damage to the natural law, we've only fueled the coming end. Should we not close the gate now? More and more of those despicable creatures continue to pour through every day; children stomping through the flowers, unaware of their own destruction." "Maybe it is time for that," Zoraida agreed. "Everything is happening so fast. Faster than I imagined." "It always does." Lilith suggested, "What about that man that leads them? Could he not be used as we had intended for Daw? To block the tear in the fabric between this world and the aether?" "He has his own desire for great power, that is true. But he is a man that does not believe in sacrifice of himself to get it. We need another." "What about Nytmare? He has aligned himself with the boy from across the Breach. They twist reality like you twist Fate." Zoraida turned to regard her and the suggestion. It had merit. She nodded, and the smile upon her face accentuated the great many wrinkles. "Yes. He plans his own ascension. We should confront that one." "Not you. He won't respond to you. He doesn't acknowledge your right to the Neverborn. He would certainly respect my right to appeal to him, but I probably should not, either," she said. "For all his power to reshape the physical world, he only understands the psychological." "Everything points back to Pandora." The hag cackled. "The girl is being tested. The Event nearly did her in." "She's gotten too familiar with the humans. They're getting in her head as she gets into theirs." Lilith stood and walked to the edge of the wooden porch and turned to Zoraida before jumping down. "I'll find her. I'll get her to confront the Nytmare, see if we can catch up to Fate's machinations before it's too late." She regretted leaving, a sensation she felt more and more. "Will I see you again?" she asked. "You've asked me that the last several times we've parted," Zoraida said dismissively.

"I have years left." "Years. Years might as well be seconds. I just met you and you were a capricious girl." "Pshaw. That was well over a hundred years ago." "Seems like yesterday. You were beautiful." "More beautiful than you." "Don't get carried away." Lilith winked at her and was gone, heading to the City to find Pandora. Time and Fate had moved faster than them, and they would pay for their every moment of doubt and hesitation. MMM

Brian Tuttle rounded the corner of Gorges Street into the alley between Mrs. Dillard's Orphanage and Richard's Apothecary, taking the familiar shortcut back to his bakery. He had tarried too long at the orphanage, surprising the little ones with some fresh tarts. In his haste, a loaf of bread rolled out of his basket, and he quickly picked it up, discreetly brushing it off, sure no one had seen him drop it. He was wrong. Candy was just ahead, and she said to him, "Mistakes happen, huh?" He yelped and stopped short, clutching the rest of the loaves from the morning's delivery against his chest. He hadn't seen her there, of course, but his surprise came not so much from her presence in the typically unused alley as much as by how she looked. Leaning against the wall with her back slightly arched, she was every bit as tall as him but long and thin. Pretending she wasn't aware of her bare leg, she lifted a foot slowly along the brick wall, her stocking pulled tight to her knee while the other had drooped to her ankle. Her skirt was many times too small for her and covered only the upper half of her thigh. Tuttle hardly noticed the sheen of her skin was more smooth and white, like cold porcelain, than the creamy tan of a normal girl. Her exposed legs and the tight shirt that lifted above her navel with each breath were positively scandalous. Even a woman of ill-repute would not be so outlandishly attired, and he took a reluctant step toward her, intent upon chastising her for her lewd presentation. Slack-jawed and bulging eyes, he was too dumbstruck to speak. Candy twirled a lock of her flaxen hair, smiling at him, innocently. Her stance and mannerisms were that of a girl many years younger and, if not for the subtle curves of her body, he might have sworn she was a child. With wide eyes and gentle smile she said, "I'm so jealous of those orphans." He did sincerely intend to reprimand her for her deplorable state of dress. He'd get to it. To start, however, he said simply, "Oh? I'm sure they've not heard that before." He laughed nervously. "Why should you be jealous of them?" "Oh, to have someone like you. You know," she said slowly, around a slight smile, "to bring them tasty treats. I have a bit of a sweet tooth, myself." She raised one of her sweets to her mouth. Sweat thickened upon his chest and beneath his arms, yet his mouth went dry. He could not look the girl in the eyes, but everywhere he looked made him more and more uncomfortable as his roving eyes could only fall upon some part of her that should be forbidden for him to see. "Oh," his voice trembled, "I just do what I can." His collar was suddenly very tight, he realized, choking him. "Is that so? Well, you are a giving person aren't you?" He said nothing but gulped hard. He was having difficulty thinking. Every thought he had was of the girl, far too young to deserve the thoughts of a lecherous man like him. "I'm kind of an orphan, too," she went on. "Do you have anything left to give me, mister?" He shook, and his eyes fluttered. She was there, in his mind, and he was reaching out for her. The girl was not wrong for how she dressed, how she looked. It was his fault, he thought. He was to blame. A person should be responsible for himself. Her narrow hand fell upon his shoulder, and its gentle weight was enough to push him to his knees. The loaves he carried tumbled before him and his eyes fluttered, too heavy now to open. In his mind's eye, he looked down upon himself from above. He saw a man brought to his knees before the presence of a young woman, too innocent and harmless to understand that her developing body could affect a grown man so profoundly. It was his affair

to manage, and he failed. It was his responsibility to control the lustful urges that compelled him more like an animal than a productive member of society. He struck himself with an open palm, hard enough to wrack his whole body, and then struck again, splitting his lip. Candy smiled. She reached out and took his hand in both of hers and leaned toward him. Close she said in a deep voice, "Now, now. No need to be so angry." She held his hand in both of hers and pulled it to her cheek, to have it caress her jaw with his knuckles. He shook visibly, his eyes rolling up into his head. She had not been a real woman for long, and she reveled in the amplification of her power. She had no desire for the pathetic creature before her, of course, but she pulled his face to hers, kissing him passionately. She could feel his pulse beating frantically in his neck. She released him, and he gibbered incoherently, eyes rolled back and foam dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

In his mind, he was desperately whipping and beating himself for his own despicable thoughts. He could not punish the stain of sin away and had such deep self-loathing that he could only desperately continue to berate and punish himself, ashamed for what he could think and ashamed he had hidden it so deeply for so long. She removed his baking cap and ran her finger through his thin hair. "There, there," she said. "It'll be okay, now." He continued to strike his own face, bruising and bloodying himself. Pandora found her like that, hovering over him, smiling as she watched him suffer, trapped in the nightmare of hate and self-judgment. "Candy!" she commanded angrily. "What are you doing?" Candy barely looked up. She shrugged absently. "Practicing?" she offered in explanation. "You don't need any practice," Pandora said in chastisement. "Now end this. Its damned bleating is going to draw attention." Candy rose, standing considerably taller than Pandora, now. She seemed to have no urgency to obey Pandora, her elder now only in technicality. "I can't stop it," she said with a smile. "I'm not actually doing anything." Pandora stomped toward her. "End it," she growled. Candy pouted, looking very much like the petulant child she so recently was. Arms folded defiantly, she turned from Pandora, nose high and lower lip jutting forward. Pandora stepped toward her, and Candy braced herself for Pandora's punishment, but the older girl bent, reaching into Candy's basket on the ground beside her and withdrew the long scissors she kept there, glaring at the young girl. Pandora jerked quickly and drove the end of the sheers through Tuttle's neck and out the other side, covered in blood and flesh. He fell back with a gurgle, his blood pooling around his head and slowly drained down the slight decline in the alley to a sewer grate nearby. His body continued to twitch as the psychological torture Candy brought upon him lingered until his very end. Turning abruptly to Candy, Pandora said, "I told you to put the creature down!" Candy wanted to ignore her, to demonstrate her newfound independence and courage, but could not help but defend herself. "What does it matter?" she retorted. "They do not matter to us. They are worthless." "You know better than that. There's a plan." "What plan?" Candy snapped. "To find a savior for Malifaux? In one of these... animals?" Pandora, too, grew impatient. "Control yourself! Not out loud. Not here!" "Why?" She rolled her eyes as she said, "Are we in danger?" She pointed at Pandora angrily. "Like you've never done what I just did? Have you, 'Dora?" Pandora's features softened. "You're right," she said more gently. "I know. It is frustrating to think we need them. We have dominion over each of the humans we confront. And I hate them here as much as you do." "Then why go through this? Why pretend? I hate them. Hate them!" she screamed, purposefully loud enough to carry beyond the alley and into the ears of the pedestrians nearby. Pandora did not care, and she looked away, down at the box she held absently at her

side. "We did this. We let them loose. We must fix it. The others believe we need a human. One strong enough to do what we may not be able to do alone." "The 'others'? Zoraida? Lilith? Then why aren't they here in Malifaux looking? We're endangering ourselves every day!" She stomped and her stocking fell further down her calf. Her hands were balled fists at her side. Pandora smiled, reminding that despite her new physical maturity she was still every bit a young girl. Neither realized it, but Lilith looked down upon them, hidden behind the thick stones of a chimney on the building beside them. She remained perfectly still, making no noise to alert the girls of her presence. She waited for Pandora to gain control of the young girl, to assert her authority lest Candy realize her growth brought her even greater potential than she realized. Instead, Pandora drew Candy to her in an embrace. She spoke quietly but Lilith heard her distinctly. Pandora said, "We do our part. Until we can determine our own path." Candy hugged her back. Pandora said, "You are what you are, a Woe of lost innocence. Of course you must do what you are meant to do. This simple

creature," she said with a motion to the corpse of Brian Tuttle, "surely wasn't strong enough for our uses. Just follow the plan until we can be free to do what we are both meant to do. And don't call too much attention to ourselves." Lilith's teeth ground quietly from her hiding place. Candy was not the only problem to fix, apparently.