

December 21 Not far from where she stood, the darkly swirling mass of clouds that had loomed for half a year above a tall mountain in the distance flashed with a bright blue light. Even at this distance the light was blinding, and she had to shield her eyes from the brilliance. She had no time to wonder what it was. Seconds later, however, the frigid air around her was sucked toward the light. It was so sudden and strong that it momentarily knocked her off balance. As the wind subsided, the air left behind was temperate and calm. Looking once more at the light upon that mountainside, she saw the snow that had been dancing on the wind drawn from every side into that dark cloud. It was an omen, she knew; a portent of something horrible that was about to befall her, possibly all of those in Malifaux. "That can't be good," she muttered. Sonnia found the cave entrance easily enough with the ancient glyphs that she could now decipher almost automatically. Of course, many of the images had been befouled by that bastard Seamus. As Hopkins had relayed, there were quite a few lewd images as well as equally offensive limericks and rhymes. Hopkins may have sought to keep the images from her as he still maintained society's notions of propriety. She smiled at this chivalry, though she hardly acknowledged the graffiti save the irritation of not being able to see the true symbols correctly. Samael had dutifully recorded as many images as he could for her interpretation, but now, studying the wall illuminated by a small orb of flame she held aloft, she found several more images in shadowed recesses that offered even more information to her understanding of what was about to befall them. Those new signs and symbols disheartened her further, though they merely reinforced what she had already come to expect. Still, it was difficult for her to proceed, knowing that deep beneath the surface Cherufe waited, an ancient Tyrant so feared that It was imprisoned in the spirit cage by Its own peers. Sonnia found the entrance to the subterranean labyrinth. Lava flowed openly in a deep channel, more than a dozen feet below her. The heat was intense, especially given her acclimation to the severe cold that had enveloped all of Malifaux since the cage had fallen. No one understood what that cage contained, not even the native Neverborn, some of which were partially responsible for entrapping Cherufe. Sonnia knew. She had searched obsessively for ancient books recording Its destructive deeds, written by the ancient Neverborn that fought against It and the other Tyrants as they devoured this world, its inhabitants, and themselves. They raced toward ascension – to abandon the last vestiges of their mortality. Those ancient texts were written over the span of many centuries, by those just wanting to survive across this world. But, even as their world fell beneath the weight of that monumental conflict, those texts migrated here, inevitably toward Malifaux, where they were lost in forgotten temples and ruins near the city. She was drawn to the books. And the words therein were as familiar to her as they were alien. More than once she had thrust a newly discovered book away as she looked through it, certain she had read it before. And though the words were written in a language no longer known even to the Neverborn, she seemed to instinctively know what they said. Once, while perusing a small, seemingly unremarkable book, she had dropped it and staggered back, knocking a full stack aside as she stumbled. Samael had been there, concerned, but she had assured him it was merely fatigue. The truth that she never spoke of, never even allowed herself to think again, was that the book was so familiar to her that it was as if she had written it herself. She knew each page before turning to see it. From her surprise, she purged the book in flame. It was the first, but only the first of many times, she unearthed a tome that spoke to her with such familiarity. It became so frequently disconcerting that she had come to expect that dreaded sense of knowing with each new written discovery. It wasn't merely the books, either. She

was frequently drawn to some remote ruins in the bayou, overgrown with vines to the extent that it was otherwise

undiscoverable. Or, some building now buried in the badlands beneath a makeshift mining boomtown. She'd go there on a 'hunch' and remarkably find the one missing piece to a puzzle she didn't even know she was working out. Like this cave. She stood in the center of the narrow chamber. Stalactites stretched from the ceiling, no more than eight feet above her, to the uneven and rocky floor below. How Seamus was connected to it all she could never fully understand. Like her, he had a strange affinity for these places, leaving his mark more than once for her to find. Samael knew he was pursuing the same written works as Criid, but he did not fully understand the degree to which Seamus, too, was drawn. Usually a step ahead of her, too, which perplexed her to no end. His befouling the wall with limericks and graffiti were taunts for her, and she knew it. It was merely a game for Seamus, and, now that she descended into the narrow passages below, she realized that she had come to anticipate the game, to enjoy it on some perverse level. She had thought that, someday, he and she would ultimately meet for some kind of showdown. That notion always seemed to linger in the back of her mind. Her sword, strapped to her back, caught on the protruding rocks of the tight crevasse descending into the tunnel below. She backed out, and removed the sword slung to her back, so that she could more easily squeeze through. Down the center of the bale was a faint blue glowing line. It throbbed brighter then grew dim again with the rising and falling of her breath. She was delivering the sword to its rightful owner; returning it, finally, to the hand meant to wield it. Cherufe. The terrible and malevolent Tyrant that nearly destroyed everything. Where December devoured everything, consuming, growing stronger, never sated – Cherufe, it was written, seemed to take pleasure in destruction. And that was all. It demonstrated no lofty goals of ascension save, perhaps, to ravage the next world beyond the aether. Earth, maybe? Even other Tyrants stood against It, aligning with the lowly inhabitants of a once thriving Malifaux city, and possibly other cities just like it, now lost in the barren landscape of the scorched Badlands or the even less hospitable wasteland beyond the Northern Mountains. But they could not kill It. In an elaborate twisting of complex promises and betrayals and false unions, they did manage to trap and expel It, but at the cost of countless lives. This was long before the Breach. She stepped down into a more open cave system, literally from below as the lava flowed, hot and orange. She coughed, gagging upon toxic gases from the molten stream. Her eyes watered and burned, and she stepped back into the cool passage between the upper cave and the winding lava flow below to catch her breath. The ground rumbled, slowly at first and just a tremor. Before she could run out of the narrow passage and the cave, the tremor erupted in a violent quake that knocked her to the ground. It was deafening, and she was battered back and forth against rocky protrusions. Streams of lava shot upwards in the tumultuous quake. Rocks fell from above to crash violently and thunderously nearby. She feared she would be crushed by falling debris or the walls so close to her. She braced herself for the inevitability. Even though the quaking continued, she was not crushed. She found herself in a sort of trance, possibly caused by the heat and vapors washing over her from below. As she succumbed to unconsciousness she had a final thought. 'This has nothing to do with the heat,' she thought. 'You're here, aren't you?' she asked in her mind. Yes. The voice of Cherufe responded in her thoughts. I have waited long for your coming. Cherufe guided her unconscious body out through narrow tunnels and into the greater channel of lava flowing southeast, toward Malifaux. She fell to

the rocky floor beside the quickly moving river of lava. RRR Sonia awakened some time later. She had no idea how long she had lain there. Though the lava channel still flowed beside her, illuminating the cave, she saw that she was no longer at the cave entrance. She had been moved. This cavern was still rough and rocky, but areas of the walls, floor, and ceiling showed signs of being carved. She knew they were. Carved out in a great labyrinth that stretched for many miles beyond the City. The vast city stood at its hub. The sewers, she knew, were just the beginning. She was closer to it now, to

Malifaux. Interesting that she had been lured to one remote and hidden location after another, far beyond the City, only to have that quest return her to the starting point. She sat up, quickly shaking the foggy stupor that dulled her mind. She couldn't be certain but thought she saw a glowing reflection from several sets of eyes disappearing in the shadows and branching tunnels. They were not natural creatures, she knew at once. She could sense them, like the gentle lure of a large soulstone more than she could see them. These creatures were different though, burning shadows at the edge of her arcane perception rather than the cool defiant spirit that could be captured, chilling the person who harnesses it. She stood, turning to face the direction of the lava flow. Far above her, the heat and gases poured through holes in the rock face by the earthquake. It had done that. Cherufe. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to breathe. Those strange creatures she had vaguely perceived belonged to it as well. Creatures of fire and molten rock given life as December had created creatures of ice and snow. She followed the lava, observing the branches of magma merging into this one as it, too, flowed into yet a wider flow. She crossed natural bridges of flat granite or basalt that had fallen from above, always keeping her on her path. 'It was underground, all along,' she thought. 'Each of the temples, each of the ruins, each of the artifacts I found up there –' She paused, both in her mind and in her pace. "No," she said aloud. "How could I have overlooked that?" She thought of those places where she had made the most important discoveries – the key books or artifacts that gave her more pieces of the puzzle. She quickly unslung a tattered leather bag from her shoulder and withdrew a beaten book with yellowed pages. She thumbed through the familiar journal quickly and found a map scrawled by her own hand. A map of the City and surrounding area. Deeper in the back of the folio she found a much different sketch she had once transcribed of the cage designed to hold Cherufe. Back to the map of the City, with graphite stick in hand, she frantically circled each of the major locations and ruins that guided her every step. In her obsessive pursuit to keep her private research hidden, obfuscated from the probing eyes of the Guild, she had never marked those locations on any map; never before recorded those key locations in any way. She saw it now, though. The last cave that led her down here – the buried library that housed not a book, but the gilded necklace that, when outstretched, had formed a map that led her to the fallen temple where she found the record describing the first rise of the Tyrants – of the Kythera ruins where they confronted December and the Grave Spirit, but where she had also found yet more pieces of the puzzle – of the ruins where she had been forced to take Francis, the Governor's son, and she had discovered the dry fragments of one important piece of parchment while he doted over some pretty trinket – of Phillip Tombers' various discoveries – thinking of those numerous places all at once, she reeled and dropped to one knee, losing her balance. She couldn't focus, not on the cave, not on anything save the great inundation of sudden awareness. She had crisscrossed the landscape dozens of times. She had thought of the City of Malifaux as the central hub and some of her research took her

nearer the City while other locations were further away. The City was not the hub. Each of those locations that provided the key instruments of understanding formed a nearly perfect circle that spanned many miles. She hadn't discovered them in sequential order, however. That had added to the confusion. Now she saw it. Putting the artifacts, books, other discoveries in order around that great circle on an imaginary map in her mind, she saw the story unfold so logically, now. Another image focused within her mind and superimposed itself on the mental map and highlighted locations she had painstakingly explored over the last three years. The new image was of a drawing, an oddly recorded schematic of Neverborn engineers that created the arcane Red Prison to contain Cherufe, the fiery Tyrant determined to consume this world in conflagration. Its shape was a circle. Key points around the cage were marked in glyphs, each drawing power out of the strange being, siphoning it into the very cage that held it. It fueled the very device of its long imprisonment. Each of those arcane points aligned perfectly with the forgotten places here, around Malifaux, where she had found more and more of the clues. The image of the mental map had several places missing from that otherwise perfect representation of the Red Cage. 'Places I hadn't even discovered yet,' she thought. It was too late to find them now. What might she have found in those places had she been there? What artifacts or clues could she use to fight for her survival and the survival of all the inhabitants within Malifaux? She regretted not knowing.

No one, so far as she knew, had ever traveled further beyond the City than her, and she had gone no further than those key points along the great circle. Was there anything left out there, across the Northern Mountains, across the dry wasteland to the west beyond the Badlands? Was the City all that remained? It was a prison. Of the Tyrants that sought to ascend; to end their imprisonment in Malifaux. The Neverborn that remained – it was their prison, too, she realized. And there were not many remaining; not enough to fill the smallest section of the great city. The settlers? Humans here through the Breach? Were they equally trapped but didn't know it? She stood and stared down the tunnel toward her destination. She knew where she was going now. In her mind, she saw the center of the great ring that surrounded Malifaux where each of the artifacts and clues had been discovered. The center of the ring was not within the City Malifaux – it was just north of its borders. It was the Breach. RRR Sonia surveyed the expansive chamber that opened beyond the tunnel, which while seemingly natural, had become ever more precise and clearly carved. The floor was now smooth and even, and the walls, too, were cut in sharp angles. The numerous lava flows ran in equally precise channels that were exact replicas of the sewer labyrinth below the City. The lava rivers poured into one wide pool from different channels from the north, west, east, and even several smaller channels from Malifaux, all leading toward the river to the south. The molten pool, really a small subterranean lake, illuminated the large cavern with warm light. The ceiling of the chamber was far above. Beyond it, directly above the epicenter of the whirlpool at the heart of the burning pool, was the crackling breach -- the gateway bridging this world and Earth. She was deep beneath the ground, but the hill above was just as large. The Breach, Ridley Station, the Governor's Mansion, even the Hanging Tree and innumerable bodies buried beneath it all loomed in the rock and dirt far overhead. "I'm here!" she called. Her voice echoed above the crackling lava which occasionally erupted in a pyroclastic crush as bubbles rose to the surface of the churning lava, now more quiescent as it moved into the large pool. Only her voice called back to her. "I'm here, you bastard! What do you want of

me?" The "me" of her voice bounced back to her in diminishing echoes. She waited. Much longer than she expected. "So you've got a sense of humor," she said more naturally. On the far side of the chamber, she could see the shape of the walls change as columns and funneled into a secondary tunnel extending out beyond her. The Necropolis, she realized. She was within the vast Necropolis. She had read much about it and had expected it. This place was significant in many of the references to the Tyrants. She realized she had just entered it but expected it ran far throughout the subterranean area below the world they knew. The answers were all below the ground. They were never looking in the right place. Or, perhaps that was their salvation. What dark secrets were buried beneath Malifaux's surface, she wondered. What dark secrets were better left undiscovered? Despite the sweltering heat within the tunnels, she had kept her coat on throughout her subterranean trek. She didn't perspire. She was never too hot. 'How long have I been in its vessel?' she thought. 'Since I crossed the Breach? Before?' She unbuckled the numerous straps holding the long coat tightly fastened around her torso. She removed the greatsword from her back and rested it against the low brick wall encircling the lava pool. The angle upon which it rested was too oblique, and when she sat upon the wall beside it, the sword clattered to the paving stones beneath her. It glowed dimly blue. 'This is what started it all,' she thought, looking at the thick blade. She shouldn't even be able to swing such a great weapon, much less wield it with any skill. Others found its weight matched its size, but to her, it was light. Where others found the metal cool to the touch, it felt warm to Sonnia, like a candle's flame when her fingers drew near it. She no longer remembered whether she had developed her mastery and manipulation of fire before or after finding the sword.

The glow behind her grew more luminous, and she jumped to her feet. She spun to see the form of a giant creature rising from the midst of the pool. It was anthropomorphic, yet reptilian, too, with twin eyes of dark obsidian that reflected her image as it rose. The lava flowed over its great body and cooled to a dark gray in seconds. The dry shell continued to crack and flow down its molten body. Between them, across its form, the cracks glowed white hot from the heat beneath. Sonnia had come here on her own, fulfilling the desperation to understand her role in the ascension of the tyrants and her clear connection to this creature, the most feared and reviled of them all. She had been unafraid. But now, standing beneath the monster that towered above her, she had only the instinctive need to flee. Her heart beat, and for the first time in several years, she felt the heat as its humid breath washed down upon her. It took all of her will to stifle the panic rising so quickly within her. She addressed the creature, shouting up at it, "You have physical form! What do you want of me?" Nothing. Its voice was soft and soothing, but deep, like a fire burning hot but long, near the end of a coal's usefulness. She was confused. Its arm reached toward her, the smell of sulfur striking first, stinging her eyes and making her recoil. She turned involuntarily from it, from the fear she could not deny as well as the foulness. Through watering eyes, she saw the sword at her feet. 'You're not here for me,' she thought. No. "You want my sword." It was never yours. So many clues. They were all so obtusely written, obfuscated so cleverly that she could barely understand the portents and prophecies that were spelled out so long before man ever set foot in Malifaux. And she knew more than any other human in Malifaux about its history and the struggle the Neverborn fought for survival. She possibly had acquired more knowledge than the Neverborn had, themselves. There was a key and a vessel they each needed. Rasputina was the vessel for December, she knew, and Seamus, too, had been

chosen though he doggedly pursued the Grave Spirit. Others she suspected and considered as she uncovered more and more of the truth. But the keys for each were so much more guarded and obscurely referenced. She had arrogantly thought she must be the chosen vessel for Cherufe. It had seemed so logical. But now, she realized that her destiny was not in becoming the living embodiment of the Fire Tyrant, but in delivering the key to open the final lock of its mortal imprisonment. Its burning hand, large enough to engulf her torso drew before her. "You want it?" she growled. "You'll have to take it." Her boot kicked beneath the cross-guard spikes, lifting it easily into the air before her. In the same movement, she grabbed the long hilt with one hand, and as she swung it up and then down toward the arm, her second hand closed around the hilt. She howled as she swung with all of her might, leaping forward beside its outstretched arm of crackling fire and molten rock. The sword slid easily through its wrist, severing it, and a spray of lava erupted as the hand fell back into the swirling pool below. Where she struck, the lava turned crystalline and blue, snaking up its arm. It seemed to groan at first, like a rumbling of rocks just before the ground would split in a quake. But, as the creature pulled back, she wondered if it was laughter. Cherufe's other arm lunged forward, faster than she could imagine, but she held her sword firm and impaled the blade into the open palm. Pressing forward against her, she could not hold her ground. Her boots dragged and scraped on the stone as she was pushed back, but the heat of its hand quickly cooled as the lava within crystallized, turning deep blue like the sword's glow. She grew confident once more. She pulled herself up onto its hand, easily drawing the sword from the cool stone of its arm. The crystallization within the arm snaked upwards toward its torso but no more than half way, and she leapt toward that point where the glow beneath the gray plates of its outer mantle was still burning white. She sank the blade within the arm, and it hissed as the arm grew blue around the impaling weapon.

The "key" was not for them to use to free the final bonds of their mortal prison after all. It was the final tool to hold them at bay. She jerked the sword free from its arm, standing upon its body above the lava. Ever inquisitive, she studied the sizzling pock-marks burning into its surface and so never saw the blue stump of its other arm swinging toward her. It struck violently, knocking her through the air. The sword flew from her, arcing end over end toward the pool. She hit the ground bodily and rolled, the wind knocked from her and several bones cracked, at the least. Sonnia watched as the weapon, her only hope, fell toward the pool. Cherufe saw both the girl and the sword and surprised her by lunging toward the weapon, as quickly as it could, to strike it in mid-air with the end of its blue hand, frozen by the magical blade for which it was created. It flew beyond the end of the pool, struck the wall, and fell to the ground. Its rocky head turned toward her, the gleaming stone eyes reflecting the lava below. Cool white vapor enveloped her as the stone in her hand cracked, releasing the spiritual energy within. She drew it in, melding the fragmentary whispers it spoke with her own formidable will, and found immediate relief from the pain. Before the healing was complete, she was up and moving, running around the circumference of the pool toward her sword. The Tyrant's arm slashed in the air, and a tall spray of fire sliced forth, striking the path before her. But Sonnia Cried was not without similar mastery of the primal forces of nature, and without pausing in her stride, her hand struck the air before her, and the wall of flame exploded before her as her own red fire struck it. She ran through the hole in Cherufe's flame wall even as it closed back around her. Not to have her escape again, its dark arms lifted quickly above its head, and the entire pool rose in a wave, rolling quickly toward her. It rose

above the short wall around the pool, at least ten feet high. She had little time to prepare for it but had grabbed another soulstone and crushed it just as the wave crested before her. Flame exploded from her outstretched arms as she slid to a halt on the paving stones, facing the lava and attacking it with the full force of the power she commanded. The fire that belched forth was deep red and streaked with cool white from the stone. She howled in defiance and determination as her own fire burst through the thick wave of lava, redirecting it as it washed down upon her. The lava spilled around her, but she was safe. The sword, however, was in the path of the orange liquid from her explosive fire. The twisting of the fabric of fate and the arcane threads of the aether were something intangible, imperceptible to almost every living thing, even those that had some mastery of the arcane, themselves. Sonnia Criid, however, had acquired her position in the Guild for the almost unique skills she commanded at being able to perceive the very exertion upon those gossamer threads that wove around all things. She saw its twisting of the threads of fate and the aether, wrapping its will about it and manipulating it. The rock beneath the sword bucked in a small but violent tremor. The sword leapt from the ground, spiraling end over end toward Cherufe. Also unlike so many other beings that could command the twisting of the fabric of fate, she had the power to unravel others' control of it, of the unnatural interference they invoked upon it. Typically, she could only affect another's aetheric manipulation if the spells they cast involved her own spiritual connection with the aether, but the sword was not just a weapon of metal, folded by man in a forge. It was a weapon made for the undoing of Cherufe, and it was intended to be wielded by her. Fate had chosen a purpose and a weapon for her long before she was ever conceived. She saw the threads of aether twisting in the space between Cherufe and the spiraling sword. They were cool and white, but gaseous and tenuous. Those threads did not envelop her, she knew. How could she unravel them? Her mind raced. Time seemed to slow as she sought the answer. It was too powerful. Cherufe had far greater control over self and the arcane than its fellow Tyrants. She knew her sword was meant to strike down Cherufe, but the Tyrant was keeping it from her, drawing it in. If it held the weapon, consumed or otherwise destroyed it, there would be nothing to stop its ascent. The image of December flickered in her mind as she succumbed to failure. But she realized something at the last moment about December. He was a mere shell of his true form. She had read dozens of manuscripts about him along with the more fragmentary snippets offered of Cherufe. For all of the Fire Tyrant's might and terror, December had occupied more of the ancient Neverborn's attention. Though the Wendigo at Kythera was formidable, nearly unstoppable, he was a mere reflection of his true self. They needed a vessel.

Cherufe had lied to her, and she knew it. She felt it. She was sure of it beyond any certainty she had known before. She was this creature's vessel. The sword was the key to its undoing, and possessing it meant it would have nothing again to fear. Nothing would step in its way, and it would consume her in the fires of its will and being. The truth struck her immediately. The sword was not the key. She was. The sword was hers, and she was tied to it. She felt the tendrils of control it had wrapped around the sword, pulling it through space. She screamed, extending her own control through the distance that separated them and severed its control over the sword. The sword continued through the air, but free from its control. Sonnia's boot hit the top of the short wall, and she released an explosive blast of concentrating fire that sent her hurling toward the sword, her legs aflame. Cherufe again tried to manipulate the threads of fate, lashing out in frustration at her unexpected defiance. Its will

striking her with the tectonic vibrations at its disposal, hitting her in the side strong enough to again snap her ribs. She could have unraveled the magical manipulations again, even easier than she did with the sword, but she did not try to stop it. Instead, she had counted on it for the strike sent her straight across the lava, feet above the burning pool. It sent her directly toward the sword hurling across its surface. Despite its strongest attempt to manipulate this outcome, this moment had been established by fate so long before either of them walked that she wondered how any of them, Tyrant, human, Neverborn – how any of them could avoid the great power that sought to right the path that they continued to twist. The Fire Tyrant could do nothing more as the sword and Sonnia came together in the space above the lava. She certainly did not try to stop it. She knew the truth now. It was in the books, the artifacts, all through the uncovered ancient messages that she found and read over and over. She was the vessel it was destined to consume. Possessing her, it would walk again, heralding the beginning of the end. The sword arced once more as she flew before it. The tip of the blade struck her in the chest and sank deep, piercing the fabric of her blouse, severing flesh, bone, and the sinews of muscle before bursting through the back of the thick canvas coat. She gasped as the metal burned, unraveling not only the threads of fate that had long entwined her, but the control of the spiritual and arcane bonds that had tied her to it. Cherufe howled and the ground trembled, splitting and bucking even as the woman and sword tumbled together into the lava.