

November 28 Pandora was not herself. She couldn't explain it, exactly, but knew something was askew as she sat upright in her bed and heard her mother fussing beyond her bedroom door, working in the kitchen, preparing a breakfast of semolina. The air was heavy with the smoke from the night's coal fires, but the rising sun cut feebly through the veil. It was a weak winter sun that was ineffective against the morning chill which clung stubbornly to the shadows and within the cracks of the cobblestones. She yawned, stretched, and pulled the quilted nightcloak about her shoulders, trying to keep warm. The thought that June should have brought with it a warm morning to greet her was dismissed as nonsense. Every day was winter. "Mother?" Pandora called as she left her room. No one was there to greet her, but a fire still burned in the potbelly at the center of the house, and embers glowed with dark orange flickers from the hearth in the main room. "Mother?" she called more loudly. Her bowl was upon the table, in its usual place, but there was nothing within it. Their home was small, and she quickly checked every room. There was no sign of her mother anywhere. Pandora was old enough to fend for herself, but the feeling of isolation fell upon her stronger than she could have imagined, and the anxiety was stupefying. She's gone to find some food. Some water, she said to herself. She'll return shortly. Still, the feeling of abandonment was strong and filled her with a sense of dread. She sought to rid herself of such nonsensical feelings as she thought her mother might – by busying herself and working the time away until she would return. So, she grabbed a burgundy shawl and wrapped it over her shoulders and head, slipped her cold feet into a pair of slippers, and grabbed a bucket from the back stoop. She stepped out into the brisk morning air and strode to the communal water pump in the alley between buildings. It wasn't the cold that caused her more discomfort, but the silence. Only halfway to the pump did she realize that none of her neighbors were about, nor were there people traveling on the street in front of their house. She dropped the bucket and, despite her nightly attire, ran around the house to confirm her fear. The street was bare. The people were gone. "No," she said in a gasp as her lower lip quivered. "Mother!" she called, needing that familiar and comforting presence to calm her and assure her that everything was as it should be. It's what we've always wanted, she thought. No more people. The place to ourselves. "We have?" she asked aloud, answering her own inner voice. Of course. Think about it. How we loathed them! "We did? I do not believe we did. Why would we?" Her inner voice spoke but was interrupted by a crash behind their home that sounded like metal cans being knocked aside. "Hello!" she called. "Anyone?" She wanted an answer and the silence that greeted her was stifling. She shivered, but not from the cold. The fear of isolation felt heavy within her and she felt she was being watched, which paradoxically compounded her fear. It was irrational, she thought, that she was growing so desperate to see someone else there, to assure herself that she was not alone, but the thought that someone was watching her made her even more uncomfortable. She looked around at the adjoining buildings, spinning madly, faster and faster, looking at each for a familiar face. The opaque blackness of each window was all she could see. The voice in her mind was so quiet and muffled, as if far away, but she heard it say, Who? "The people here," she said around a cry. "The people!" Quieter, still, and far away, the voice said, Who? It wanted a name, she realized. She thought to say their names, to appease her inner fear, but when she began to speak the names of her neighbors, nothing came to her. At the door of a neighbor's house, she shook the handle, but it was locked. She pulled herself up to look through

the front window, but the interior was so dark that she could see nothing but shadows. After she had dropped back to the ground below did she realize that the other windows, clearly visible from the outside of the house, offered no light into it when she looked through that front window. Her stomach growled and her lips were cracked. Her fingers and toes were numb in the frigid air. Still, she pulled herself back to look into that window, more intently examining the inner space. Deep shadows were all she could see. The dim gray light of the morning could not penetrate the darkness on the other side of that window, and her reflection was the only thing visible. Against the darkness, her own image was too strong to make out any of the furniture or other contents of the home. If there were no people, perhaps they would, at the least, have a small store of food or water and that would be a treasure, indeed, in these difficult times where both were in such short supply. She moved to her left, trying to find a better angle where her reflection wouldn't block her view, and thinking that if she looked at a more oblique angle into the room instead of through her reflection, she might better see something therein. But her reflection didn't follow her as she moved. When it cocked its head, a movement she didn't make, and seemed to look at her inquisitively, she yelped and fell to the ground below, landing full on her backside. She screamed as her own dim reflection remained there in the window, looking down on her before pulling away and turning to walk into the darkness of the house. She couldn't help herself as the terror mounted and she ran to the back of her home and in through the backdoor. She slammed the door and bolted the lock and then fell to the cold worn planks, crying inconsolably. Reaching out to a nearby rug, she pulled it over herself, hiding her face within its dusty folds, rolling herself into a ball. Only a few minutes passed that way, but in her fear, it seemed like forever. Against the wall beyond the potbelly stove rested the small axe they used to chop the timber for their fires. She snatched it up and was hacking at the front door of the next door neighbors whom she could not remember. The head barely sank into the wood as she struck, for it was heavy and thick and she was weak. But each strike brought with it more anger and determination. The strange darkness beyond, and her living reflection horrified her, but she needed to know what was within. An hour or more passed before she had a splintered hole, narrow and ragged, cut into its face. She dropped the axe beside her to thrust her bare arm through the small hole she had carved, cutting herself as her arm and hand scraped against the jagged wood. She groped for the handle, and if she thought the cold outside was severe, the strange feeling that struck her lacerated arm made her think all the heat within her was being drawn out. When the door swung inward, the light behind her could only penetrate the shadows several feet in. She was ready for that, however, having grabbed a kerosene lamp kept over the mantle before leaving her house. She lit it quickly, and its light, too, could barely penetrate the ashen gray darkness. She stepped into the house, disturbed that she could only see a few feet before her but determined to continue. She followed the edge of the rug, deep burgundy and gold, she guessed, though it was like looking through a fog in the depth of night, even though it was literally right at her feet. The wall nearest her was just beyond her reach, but it was even more lost in the shadows and she could barely make out the darker lines of the wainscoting and ornate frame of a picture above it upon pale wallpaper with elaborate filigreed columns. When she had taken several more steps and the faint outline of another frame, seemingly identical in size and shape to the first, came into her view, she turned, holding her lamp outstretched to examine the first she had passed, but the wall was barren save the faint swirls of the floral print of the wallpaper. The light of the door was faint and far away, just a pinhole, even though she had taken only several steps into the room. She

couldn't help herself. Going no further in that wretchedly cold room, Pandora ran as fast as she could toward the pinhole of light that was the door, so far away. She ran and she ran but could get no closer to it, even though, by her reckoning, it should have been only six feet away, at the most. Running gained her no ground toward the door, and as she came to a stop, the small doorway in the great distance slowly narrowed, as if the door might be swinging shut, but it continued to shine, as a beacon behind her. The floor, she found, was the same – wooden planks with that thick rug upon it. The walls, too, were marked with the vertical lines of the wainscoting. Turning to resume her trek, the frame of the picture loomed before her, exactly where it was before she had run from it.

She walked as if carrying a great weight, step after step, but it did not seem to get any further into the house. She wished to weep again but had no energy, and the dehydration left her tearless. Crying was the only thing that made sense to her. She walked past the picture and tried to examine the image upon it, but the face upon the canvas was a muddy, indistinct shape, like a shadow within a shadow. She continued on, following the line of the carpet, afraid to deviate from the path. As the picture faded disappeared in the darkness behind her, another came into view immediately before her. As she feared, it was the same indistinct shape of a person without form, identical to the last. She intended to pull the picture from the wall and nearly set her lamp down but thought better of releasing the light and held it firmly as she pulled the large framed painting from the wall. It fell, and she hurled it into the room toward the opposite wall. Knowing the outside dimensions of the house, she knew the wall should be only eight feet away at the very furthest. The frame neither struck the wall, nor made any noise at all if it fell to the floor. It was simply consumed silently by the gray darkness. Turning to resume her trek, as that was the only recourse, the picture was there ahead of her again. She collapsed against the wall, holding her head perfectly still at the exact space between those damnable pictures. The one behind her was just gone, and the one before was not yet in sight. A movement one way or the other would return a frame into vague perception. The wall was there as it should have been, but the light from that faraway door now loomed ahead of her, in a strange reversal. She turned back, and the dim gray was all that was there, but the wall was on her left now. It was a minor change but disoriented her greatly. She took a step forward, in the same direction she had been going with the wall on her right and carpet on her left, now toward the light. She hesitated. It was a trick. Here eyes could not be trusted. Not in that place. Turning, Pandora walked away from the light and into the depth of darkness. "Hello?" she called loudly, and her voice echoed back as if she were in a great cave. She called out again and again until she realized something was off. Where she called "hello?" with an inflection of a question, the echoed voice was more of an acknowledging statement. "Hello?" she called again, over-emphasizing the upward lilt at the end. In equal emphasis, her echo was a firm statement, different than her own. She tried it again with the same result. But when she tried it with eyes open, the echo was the same fading tone as her own intonation. She realized that nothing was as it seemed. Reality had little meaning, and her eyes were the least to be trusted. Eyes closed, then, she reached out her hand. It struck the solid surface of the painting that had showed up over and over. She looked at it now, with her finger touching the edge of the frame. Strangely, the small light in the distance was now behind her, although she faced the wall and the painting directly, as if it were all in reflection. She leaned closer to examine the painting, holding her lamp close to her face and its surface. The image thereupon was indistinct and amorphous – just a blob of

shape in the center. "It's Mother," she said, recognizing the figure there although it was so indistinct. "But that's not right. How could it be? There's no sense in that. This isn't even our home." The gray void pulsed in that low rumbling growl. The thought of her mother irritated her for some reason. She leaned close to the picture again. She came to recognize the familiar colors of her own hair, flesh, and burgundy around the lower mass of colors that resembled the burgundy shawl wrapped over her shoulders. She gasped and stepped back. The image, indistinct though it seemed, was other. The void behind her growled again. She had no means of defending herself against whatever might be out there. She returned to the image, more anxious and determined. "It's a mirror," she said. Using her sleeve, she rubbed vigorously at the thick grime coating it, making it difficult to see. Sure enough, the oily coatings slowly rubbed away to reveal her own reflection, smiling in faint triumph at the discovery. As she turned her head and shifted in place, examining the mirror, she could not help but jump, shrieking briefly as something moved in the dark depth behind her reflection. She spun, assuming it was behind her, but the void was undisturbed. Pandora turned back to the mirror and jumped again. She stood off-center, slightly to the left of the mirror. Her reflection stared back at her, but at an angle from her right.

She couldn't take much more of the torment and sank to her knees. It's a game, she said to herself. Heart beating and exhausted from the emotional trauma, she didn't even know what that statement meant. "What game?" she asked. Figure it out. The thought of her Mother embracing her entered her mind. It might have been a comforting thought of protection. Instead, it made her feel helpless and impotent, needing to rely upon another. That was the key, she suddenly realized: the image of her mother in her mind was as vague and formless as the smudged reflection of the mirror. She stood, staring at her reflection. "There is no Mother," she said resolutely. "It's a lie. I am alone." She had no fear of that isolation but took pride in it. She closed her eyes, fingers reaching out to touch the surface of the mirror. She thought of it breaking. She could not run from the mirror, and she could not discard it into the surrounding void, either. But as she focused upon the mirror shattering, thinking of the shards of glass in her mind with clarity, the mirror split in a fracture down the center. She opened her eyes, though she regarded her reflection with a fierce and angry expression. She was on one side of the crack in the mirror, her reflection on the other. "It's not real," she said. "This is all a lie." She stared at herself in the mirror that began to tremble, vibrating on the wall. "I am not real. It is a dream." The mirror shattered, sending shards of glass flying through the air. As the first jagged piece struck her arm, her flesh shattered, too, as if she were the mirror. Her arm, torso, all of her fractured just as the vague images of the rug and wall broke. The pieces flew off to be consumed by the gray void. Pandora, the reflection, stood with her arm outstretched, touching the epicenter of the broken glass where her other self had just been. Her reflection had carried the kerosene lamp in the right hand, but it now held the arcane box that contained her sorrows. She remembered most of the experience that led her into that abandoned house in Malifaux, with a winter that lingered into June, but smaller details were already dissipating, as dreams typically do. A heavy footfall behind her made her jump as it struck the ground like a great hammer upon stone. She spun to face a towering creature that came out of the foggy darkness that surrounded her. The Beast towered over her, standing at least eight feet tall with its head hung down below its bulky shoulders. Although its deeply-muscled arms and torso were similar to that of a giant man, snapping jaws with dagger-like teeth were inset within its torso, chomping at the flesh of its arm as

it leaned forward. Its head was a stretched and fur-covered parody of some goat-like animal. Long and conical, almost rabbit-like, ears hung back and down around its neck just behind two thick horns that curved down toward its jaw. Its eyes were extremely large, even for its already massive skull, and completely black, but small, pinprick dots sparkled within like the reflection of a night sky. Its snout was long, wide, and bony with short-bristled gray hair, but its thin black lips were pulled up and back, exposing its quickly chattering teeth, every one of them long, wide, and flat. It stepped forward again, into the brightness of the circle of light in which Pandora stood, and its leg was powerfully thick. Its thigh alone took as much space as three of the girls, and it bent back at the knee and then came down again, like the hind leg of a mighty stallion. Its large-hoofed foot struck down into the carved slate ground with a crack, and it snorted through flared nostrils. This was the great and ancient creature that had many names, but she knew him as Nytmare. His appearance had changed since last she had seen him, now more fur covered and less plated with bony armor. He was always different, forever changing, like the horrible dreams he brought. She should fear him, as almost all things did, but she understood him better than most and stepped toward him unafraid. "I came looking for you. I thought I'd catch you, but it was I who was caught. How did you do that?" She should be furious with him for tormenting her within the nightmare. Instead, she was impressed, perhaps envious of the power he possessed over one so strong as her. It chattered, clicking noises in its throat or clacking its large teeth in a kind of speech that she didn't at first understand. It spoke again, and she began to understand as images formed in her mind that seemed quite clearly not hers. She understood it to say, 'I did nothing.' "The dream was mine? Yes, the dream is always the dreamer's. But you manipulate it. Twist it. For the fear it instills. Thoughts of a mother? That's how I broke your illusion."

He chattered and clicked and she understood him to say, 'Are you sure that's part of my twisting? Did you think of her tormenting you or bringing you comfort?' The anxiety returned as he spoke of such things. "I loathe them," she said firmly. 'Of course.' His foot struck the large slate slab upon which they now stood as he stepped toward her. 'Don't we all loathe them?' But the images he conveyed had a hint of mockery, as if to suggest that they did not loathe the humans but somehow envied them. She dismissed it as further torment. Tormenting her with thoughts of them. However, she was once again impressed by his ability to twist a person's fears against them as she was so many years before when she had first discovered the depth of her abilities and how similar she and the Beast were. But she was no longer young and lacking a will of her own. "We need your assistance," she said as commanding as possible. He stood further upright, stretching tall above her. "There's no more time for us to follow our own agendas." He snorted, his breath washing down upon her warm and foul. 'You have put aside your own agenda Pandora?' It was odd how he accentuated the first syllable of her name. 'You think you can hide your thoughts from me? Here, in this place?' The box at her side struck a high, long chord of sound as if responding to him. When it finally dissipated, the Beast leaned forward to regard her more closely. 'You serve their needs? Lilith and the hag? The Box? Do you hear it, yet? Do you hear it speaking to you Pandora? Do you know which is the master, you or the Box?' She did not hear it speak, as he suggested, and thought it was another of his tricks to sow confusion and doubt. Her box was a tool, and she controlled it, she thought firmly. "What about you? Who do you serve? The boy?" "My servitude is to a higher need. As is yours." He continued to look at the dark box held at her side, which perplexed and agitated her. True that it

possessed strange abilities that augmented her own, but she found it strange that he might suggest it was more. She sought to refocus the discussion. In this dream-world, he was too strong, too manipulative, even against one such as her. "We've come to you for help. Our need is dire. We must stop the Tyrant Entities as our ancestors once sought to do. Where they failed, we must succeed." "Stop?" "We must end them. Finally. They stir again, gathering their strength and their form. They once again interfere with the tangible world. December is known and nearly rose again during the Event. Zoraida thought he might have been killed by the Otherworlder. The girl with the Masamune. Its power was foretold to disrupt the connection they have between the aether realm and our own." "Killed? There is no killed. Not of a Tyrant." Then how can they be stopped? They mean to ascend. It will destroy us. It will destroy everything. "That has always been the intent of a Tyrant. They cannot be stopped. But they draw power from the aether as ones such as you and some of the humans. They may channel their power as you do through a totem linked to your will. As they exist more in that world, they need a vessel of this world." "Like you and the boy?" Nytmare stood abruptly, genuinely surprised at the reference. Pandora said, "Are you a Tyrant?" He was clearly taken aback, having never considered such a thing. The Beast paused and looked down upon her from high above. Its teeth gnashed audibly and she felt it was both vehement and proud. It looked back to the box which hummed now with a resonating chord as though from a single long string on a harp. The Beast said, 'I am Nytmare. I am Agreus. I am Nomios. I am Phobos. I am Divergence. I am Ahriman and Angra Mainyu. I am Nihil. I am the Light upon the Dark.' Reciting his many names made little sense to her, though he spoke as if it were the appropriate answer to her question. "You said we serve a higher purpose. If we cannot kill a Tyrant, what of the vessel? The girl December has chosen. If she is killed, will He--" "He would choose another." "But the Cage has fallen. It has torn through the fabric between this world and the aether. Released great power. They gather it, growing too quickly. How can we stop them if they rise again, like December, like Plague?"

Now the Tyrant Cherufe is free from the prison. Whom might stop it if it chooses a vessel?" His great head drew close to hers. 'It has already chosen. It chose a vessel while still imprisoned. One of the first to cross through the Breach. But we can use the power flooding this world, too,' he chattered. A great nail protruding from his forefinger struck the box, nearly knocking it from her. 'To trap them. To keep them from the physical.' She jerked the box away from his striking finger, scowling at him. "It is not one of them," she said. He huffed several times, each in quick snorts. It may have been laughter. Did he know something, or was this more of his trickery? She looked down upon it, cradled against her hip. Faint diaphanous tendrils escaped from the closed lid, snaking around her waist and down her leg in gossamer arms of green, blue, and purple. But they were faint, and she could not feel them. "What is it?" she asked him of the box. The box struck a higher, longer chord. As the lingering sound slowly dissipated he said more uncertainly, 'It is of all. Material. Spiritual. Ethereal. Astral. It breached the barrier between. It is Pandimensional. It is Panthereal. It is Pandemonium.' The vaporous tendrils flared with more intense color as the Beast intoned the last three strange words. A sharp pulse of sound emanated from within it, trembling now in her hands. The sound was so high that it caused her to wince. When she opened her eyes, the gray void was gone, and she stood in the middle of the room that she inhabited within the heart of Malifaux. She looked out the window, and it was cold, with frost on the ground, as it was in her dream. Her heart beat with the lingering anxiety of that nightmare, but she knew it was November. Still, as she

left the room, her heart quickened yet again, so afraid was she that she did have a mother and that woman would be waiting for her. As her hand turned the cold knob of the door, releasing it from the latch, she told herself that it was a vile thought. Still, she had the lingering hope that an aging woman might be there.