

January 15, 115 PFOrville Weaver knelt in the dry riverbed. Although mid-January, unseasonable warmth had pushed in from the south, dissipating the thin layer of frost that had settled in the night. Numerous buckles down the front of his gray duster held it wrapped tightly around him, and he began unfastening one after another to afford more freedom of movement as he examined the ashen dirt. His gloved hand broke through the top layer of soil easily, and the clod broke into a loose pile of sand. Upon his hat, a cross between a gentleman's top hat and the more wide-brimmed hats of the cattlemen working the range, rested a set of mechanical goggles held around the crown by an elastic band. He pulled them over his face, securing them across his brow with the leather side flaps so that no light could interfere with his examination. Glancing quickly to the sky, he worried that he might actually need some additional light due to the thick and ominously dark clouds that had loomed for the past months. They looked ready to unleash a torrent at any moment. Of course, that had been the prevailing thought for weeks, yet the clouds had only released a minute long drizzle several days earlier. "What do you reckon dried it up?" Louis Hernandez asked as he approached the kneeling investigator. Orville said nothing. He dialed the clockwork mechanism on the goggles, and the gears protruding from the lenses adjusted to bring the grains of sand into clearer focus. Another button dropped a dark blue filter in front of the convex lenses so that he could see a different spectrum of light upon the grains. Constance Weber, the commanding Guardsman on site barked, "Step back, Hernandez." A gust of wind picked up, and she held the dark gray hat upon her head lest it blow away, like the sand in Investigator Weaver's open hand. He studied the grains as they blew, the opaque cerulean lenses close to the material as it quickly flew in the breeze. When his gloved palm was free of the sand, he pulled the goggles away from his face and rested them upon the base of his hat once more. He withdrew a narrow wafer of lead from a pocket on his vest and wrote the findings within his log. Constance stepped up from behind. They were more escorts to the investigator, but, like Hernandez, she was anxious to have anything to explain the sudden and severe drought. "Same as site three?" she asked. Orville turned toward her and could not hide his frustration. It was startling to see his emotions, given the typically stoic demeanor of all the investigators. "Fraid so," he said. "Volcanism so close to the surface dried it right up. Even if water still stood, there's too much sulfur, hydrogen chloride, and other elements that would make it undrinkable." She didn't understand much of the mumbo-jumbo, but "undrinkable" was enough. He stood and brushed the gray dust from his knees. As he walked toward the horses, his feet kicked up small clouds. Undrinkable. Like the wells that still produced within Malifaux. Too many toxins from the volcanic upheaval that had struck some weeks past. They had, thankfully, subsided, but the damage done was far more outreaching than the accompanying quakes that had brought down some buildings or put cracks in the foundations of many more. The investigator mounted, and the Guardsmen quickly followed. "We going to site five?" Constance inquired. Orville nodded. "We'll go to them all. No need to check 'em with the spectrometer, though. They'll all be the same. Let's ride hard and be quick about it. We're looking for water that still runs, now." His spurs dug into the flanks of his mount, and they rode a brisk gallop toward the northern mountains, hoping to find decent water coming down. Miners were up there again, cutting blocks of snow and ice and shipping them down to Malifaux. But the caravans could not keep up with the demand of Malifaux's population. Orville Weaver needed to get back to the Enclave by sunset. Lucius Matheson demanded a report.

Rose Crowshaw turned quickly at the alley between the narrow bank and the Hourglass Hotel and Saloon. She stepped lively through the dirt that stuck to her boots from the bog water that permeated the soil in the boomtown of Hope, near the larger swamp region. She didn't take notice. Her boots were well worn, and the layers of dirt and oil were as much a part of their makeup as the original leather beneath. They were not the fashionable women's boots of the day, either. They were men's boots, cut for an adolescent boy most likely, as were her britches. She hadn't considered wearing dress in a long time. Certainly before she became a steamfitter back home, and she brought none of her more feminine items through the breach some years past. She did still wear the tight corset that had become so fashionable in the day, but it was more because the tight garment offered no loose fabric to get caught in the gears and cogs of the devices she repaired. Someone was following her, she was certain. She had felt someone watch her every move ever since that strange confrontation with Kaeris back in November. Even after transferring to Hope, a very remote boomtown far on the outskirts of the Malifaux territories, she hadn't shaken the eyes that always seemed to be upon her every move. A shadow passed overhead, and she ducked against the side of the Hourglass and looked quickly up but saw nothing. "Just paranoia," she whispered to herself. "Shake it off." But she couldn't. Coming to the end of the narrow alley, she hid in the shadows behind a large barrel, looking back and forth for whoever might be following. She was off the central road, more out of sight, but that might not be a good thing, she realized. Whoever was after her might be more free to act against her without the fear of witnesses. But that wasn't true, either. She had been alone frequently since abandoning her post at the Breach and transferring first to Promise and now Hope. She had been alone in her small shack just outside the town. She had been alone in the mine repairing steam-mining constructs and elevator mechanisms. Looking back down the alley, there was no movement, no sounds. Nothing in the back of the buildings either, save the outhouses. Paranoia. Nothing was after her. She wondered if it were some odd side-effect of her ability that she felt constantly watched or pursued. Perhaps Kaeris had not done anything out of the ordinary when they met at the Breach, either, but the manifestation of fear was a product of her own out of control imagination. Rose dismissed the feeling of dread as she stepped out of the shadows. Along the backs of the buildings she'd at least feel more certain that no one else was nearby. The sound of a scratch upon the roof above her made her freeze, and she looked up in a panic. Only a dark cat. It ran along the edge of the roofline as she chastised herself for irrational fear and continued on. But the cat leapt from the roof before her. As it descended, it changed in midair, shifting in size and shape in the span of a second or two. It was no longer a black cat, but as it landed it had become a woman just as her foot struck the ground. She stood before a very stunned and speechless Rose Crowshaw. The woman's thick blonde hair flowed over her tanned shoulders like a mane. Rose turned to run. She spun, but behind her stood a powerfully built man, his dark skin, tightly knotted dreadlocks, and thickly muscled torso, exposed to the winter elements made him seem primal. How he snuck up behind her, without a sound and from out in the open, she couldn't understand. Anxiety and the sense of doom turned to outright panic, and she was about to scream when the dark man touched her forehead with the tip of his curved staff. As it touched her skin, she heard a low hum within her mind. Images of running in a pack, of being free of a society that made such demands upon her for behavior and thought. She was bombarded by images of independence. "Calm," the man said, his voice resonant and commanding. She obeyed, her hammering heart slowed almost instantly, and the fear

dissipated as quickly. She would follow any command he gave her. In his presence she felt safe and confident. "I am Marcus," he said. "You will be safe with me." She already knew that. Looking up into the depth of his eyes, she knew she would have nothing more to fear. "You were following me?" she asked. "We were not the only ones, but those agents will no longer be a concern to you, or anyone else for that matter." She knew it was true. With him leading her, she was secure that nothing would be a concern for her. With him, she felt free of society and had a strange new sensation to abandon everything she knew of her role

as a mechanic. She never fit in, anyway, she thought. Never wanted to belong. She had always sought to be free. She wanted to run. She wanted to run with Marcus and the girl that had been a cat. She wanted to hunt. A strange noise escaped from deep within her throat. Was she purring? Marcus smiled down upon her. "The strength you feel comes from the primal power unlocked from within. It will dissipate shortly." He touched her again with the tip of his shillelagh. Even more commandingly he said, "You will remember the strength you feel." She would never forget. She didn't need him to command it. "Where are we going?" she asked. It didn't really matter. She'd follow him anywhere. "Into hell, most likely," he said. He smiled. The danger he anticipated intoxicated him, and she felt it, too. "Why have you chosen me?" "You have a primal skill I need. One that I want, and have sought my whole life. I will study you. In the hunt." RRRThe Governor General stood against the railing along the balcony adjoining his private study. A crew was busy within, repairing the damage caused by the recent quake, the epicenter of which seemed directly below the mansion. Repairing it again. Of course, the crew was different than the last repair crew that had worked on his study. Strange happenings seemed to befall any crew that worked within the mansion. The Governor, himself, assured this crew that he would assign his personal guard to them once their work was complete, to escort them to their next assignment. When asked about their next assignment, however, he merely responded that the details were still being worked out. Various Guild investigators stood behind him, ready to report their findings as he commanded. His secretary, Lucius, remained in the shadow to his right. Orville Weaver began. "As we suspected, Sir, the volcanic activity did more than shake and batter the city. The release of different chemicals and compounds has poisoned what water might be found in the numerous wells, and the saturation of heat in the soil seems to have quickly dried up the otherwise plentiful running water sources coming into the City from out of the mountains." "The volcanic drought extends to the mountains?" the Governor inquired. "Nearly. But the recent sub-zero temperatures have the water there frozen too deeply to melt even at the base of the mountains." He thought on it for a moment, staring south upon his City. "Mister Clemm," he commanded. "What are your findings on the livestock?" Investigator Clemm was considerably meeker than Weaver, and he shook far too visibly in the presence of both Lucius Matheson and the Governor General. Even the other investigators made him uncomfortable. Here he regretted accepting the position as a field agent, not for the first time. He also wondered how he had been assigned the task of investigating the strange occurrences that had befallen the numerous ranches outlying the city. He mustered what courage he could. Speaking quickly to get it over with as soon as possible he said in a squeaky voice, "As Mister Matheson predicted, some ailment has befallen the non-indigenous animal stock brought here from Earthside. They've gone feral. Animals long domesticated and long unthreatening have developed a strange thirst for blood." He thought he was finished. He thought that would be enough. The Governor General said, "Go

on." Roger Clemm swallowed hard, and the sound carried to them all. "They attack anything in sight. They kick, scratch, bite anything moving. They refuse to eat anything save living flesh." "Has it spread to each of the ranches?" "Not yet. I predict it will have infected all of them within weeks. A month at the most." "Cause?" "Unknown, Sir. Malifaux, I guess." The joke fell flat. Here regretted the attempt. Investigator Amelia Estremera spoke up, saving the uncomfortable Clemm from any more scrutiny. "This does not bode well for the social climate in Malifaux,"

she said. The Governor actually turned to face her, irritated that she spoke out of turn without waiting for him to address her. Still, he knew her intent and had all he needed from Roger Clemm as the man was clearly without any new information of any worth. In fact, he only offered what was already known and told to him before setting out on his investigation. "It's not your job to gauge the demeanor of the city's inhabitants, Ms. Estremera," he said archly. "It's mine." "Sorry, Sir," she said, suddenly timid. "Make your report," he commanded. "The plague continues to spread. It's moved beyond the Quarantine Zone, beyond the slum district as well. Although it's not as potent as the initial outbreak in early fall, there are no known survivors that have contracted the illness." He turned to the final investigator. Gerald Stevens said, "Several groups have formed various coalitions around the City and have openly engaged in rebellious activities." "Known affiliations?" "None, Sir. None that have been discovered, and I interrogated several rigorously. I believe they are independently organized groups raising an insurgency to protest the decline of safety and living conditions." "There will be connections to the Arcanists. Possibly Resurrectionists as well. Continue probing." "Of course, Sir," Stevens said, though he did not believe he would find any such connections. "Part of the rhetoric of several of these rebellious groups is to immediately abandon their homestead here in Malifaux. Hundreds have already done so. Given the casualties of the plague, the death toll of their own violent protests, and the fear of the rising drought and famine, we predict a sharp decline in the population. Save the initial criminals assigned work duty here as well as others refused travel visas, the growth of the rebellious parties seems to have infiltrated most walks of life. If conditions worsen as predicted--" The Governor had heard enough and cut him off. "Matheson," he barked irritably. "Close the Breach to travel. Effective immediately. Limit the run to soulstoneshipment and essential goods import." "Immigration as well?" Lucius asked. "No need to add to the discontent. No travel. No immigration. Double the Guardsmen's watch duty. It's time to declare martial law. No one moves within the city save essential duties your office will approve." "It will require some time to implement such drastic changes." "You have no time, Mr. Matheson. You'll enact my edict immediately. Spare no time. No manpower. See that it's handled." Lucius nodded. He would get it done. He never failed. "You're all dismissed," he said, and turned back to the city in the valley below him. They each filed out with Lucius at the end. When they had gone he smiled, and his grip upon the railing tightened. "Even better than planned," he whispered. "Even better than planned." One construction worker just beyond the open door thought he heard the Governor chuckling.