

December 21 Minutes Before the Winter Solstice Rasputina knelt at the edge of the cliff, near the spot where Joss had climbed and also where she had kicked him off to die of blood loss or exposure. She could have killed Joss, of course, just as she killed the priests. Certainly she had no qualms about killing. Not anymore. Part of her wondered why she didn't. She tortured him and left him at the edge of death but stopped there. But she knew Mara would defy her, would save him. Why did she let that happen, she wondered then and many times since. Perhaps she tested herself. To see if she could stop. To see if she were still in control. There were more priests down in the temple she planned to educate. Men who used their combined might to subjugate the women drawn to December's call, just as she was. It could have been her, she knew, that fell victim to their misguided attempt at keeping the mighty Tyrant December from fulfilling His ancient machinations. It was a lie they all told themselves, selling it so fervently that they came to believe it themselves. She wondered what might have been accomplished if they'd chosen to guide the girls, taught them to use their formidable power to stand against December, together. She knelt with her bare knees buried in the snow. The Silent Ones and acolytes believed she was meditating. It had been many days since she had eaten. The only water they could give her froze as it touched her lips, yet still they pressed the frozen slivers into her mouth, hoping it would be enough. Her skin had grown more pale, more cold in touch and appearance. Her fur cloak billowed gently behind her, leaving the bare skin of her shoulders exposed. It didn't matter. Cold no longer affected her. It hadn't for quite some time. Frozen veins, twisting tendrils of blue lines just below her skin, snaked out from the edge of her bodice below her chest and up to her neck. They were faint, beneath the skin, but growing more visible every day. One of the lesser priests came out of the depth of the shadows from within the cave. He was terrified and slinked along the wall, hoping to go unnoticed. One of the two Silent Ones attending Rasputina jerked upright, prepared to fight. The expression on her face and in her posture conveyed her intent. She was not as defiant nor as trained as Mara, but she had grown much more confident in the recent months since Rasputina had come to deliver them. He shrank back into the cave. The Silent One recognized him as he poked his head from the darkness. He was on Rasputina's list, though not a priority as some were. He probably guessed as much, hiding deep in the bowels of the mountain, in some unused and forgotten chamber. They would have found him when Rasputina called for him. Now, he surfaced, hearing rumors that perhaps Rasputina had left the conclave since she hadn't called for another priest in days. At least a few other priests had made a run for it and might have made it out alive. The Silent One moved to confront him, to send him scurrying back into the heart of the mountain to await this turn before Rasputina. The hand of the other woman in attendance touched her upper arm, stopping her. The second motioned for her to wait. The Silent Ones had learned to communicate with one another very quickly, and almost imperceptible facial gestures allowed her to convey her thoughts immediately. The first girl slowly nodded in apprehensive agreement and, still angry, motioned for the priest to come out. The second pointed toward the other side of Rasputina – the cliff face that would drop to the path some twenty feet below. He watched them from within, no doubt gauging their strength against his own. He also wondered if it was a trick Rasputina was playing and she'd spring to life when he wasn't expecting it. He nearly gave in to his fears of a painful death, almost returning to his hiding place beneath the mountain. But that would lead to his inevitable death, and he knew it. Hesitantly, he stepped into the light. He squinted and blinked, shielded his eyes against the

glare from the snow and ice. Although the swirling mass of clouds above was dark, he had not been out of the shadows since September. When she had arrived.

The Silent One, with a cold and distant expression, pointed toward the cliff edge again. In desperation, he had surfaced with the hope of escape, and now that the girls commanded him to leave, to banish him, he hesitated once more and looked back. The Cult of December had inhabited the ancient caverns here for just over a year. But the sensation of dread stayed his footsteps. He longed for the comfort of the conclave, of the group dedicated to December. But more, he hated to admit, of the promise of power that had been dangled before him. It was gone. She had stripped them of their power and position. Even as the higher priests moved to silence her she had acted, freezing them in ice, though the lower chambers were dry. It was as if she had been warned of them. And they had celebrated her coming – it was a portent of the power amassing around them. Lost, alone, and near death after her escape at Kythera, she should not have been able to traverse the twisting path up the mountain. Yet she had. Alone and without a guide and without even knowing of the hidden temple. Just her and the strange furry pet she called her Wendigo. Of course the skittish beast had fled as she had fallen exhausted in the very spot she now knelt. Mere months ago he had thought they would control December by controlling her. Their power and illusion of dominion were dispelled within hours of her waking on that fateful day of deliverance. He approached apprehensively. Either of the Silent Ones could dispatch him rather effortlessly without the other priests to fuel him with their arcane mastery. They clearly knew this and stood fearless. The temperature plunged with each step toward Rasputina and the ledge. Also, unlike the Silent Ones, he had no natural protection against the cold and pulled his thick bearskin parka around his torso and face. He passed Rasputina without looking at her. At the edge, the wind raged violently just beyond him, and he could feel its unnatural force buffeting his fur-lined boots. It drew all heat from his toes, and he knew that a deeper cold awaited him below. He turned back once more to the temple entrance, still reluctant to leave. As he turned, Rasputina's eyes snapped open and fixed on him without lifting her head. She made no move to attack him, but rumors of her unspeakable methods of torture were enough to terrify him beyond reason. Hesitating no longer, he plunged into the gale beyond the ledge. It was instantly numbing, and the power of the wind threw him against the jagged rocks. As despair set in with the realization he could not survive the rage of this unnatural force, he hoped he would succumb to it quicker, more gently than his death at her unmerciful hands. Acolytes had said she was in a trance for those days she knelt beneath the fierce dark eye of the storm, that she wasn't even aware of them any longer. That wasn't true, although she did slip in and out of perception as others might understand it. She spoke to Him, to December. She taunted him, threatened him. 'You are weak,' she had repeated over and over. 'I have grown strong.' YOU ARE NOTHING TO ONE SUCH AS I. 'Lies. You know I know you now. You promise an end to the hunger. Gorging until we are sated. I have fed on the weak without you. I have consumed their inner spark, more filling than a soulstone. I have felt you there, hungry, wanting to feed on them yourself. But I wouldn't let you.' I TAKE WHAT I WANT. 'Then take me. If you can,' she taunted. 'You scoffed at the Plagued, said He was impatient and that was His undoing. That you knew the path to ascension. You were afraid I'd know the truth, and I do. His failed ascension did not leave the way open for you, but for me. It freed me. The power of the Event fed me, and I gorged upon it.' That's when she had opened her eyes and looked upon the priest at the edge of the rock wall. 'You're hungry for it. Thirsty,' she

said as the Priest dove into the howling wind below. 'You smell his spirit and have starved in your weakness. It wasn't the Plague whose impatience was His undoing. It was yours.' FEED UPON THEM. WHEN I CONSUME YOU, THEY WILL BE MINE. I WILL LEAVE NOTHING OF YOU BUT A SHELL. She ignored him. 'You were impatient at Kythera. Taking a form used all the energy you had absorbed this last century. But they closed the Breach and left you desperate for more. Aching. They opened it again and fed you those spirits. You were a fool. You were afraid

they'd shut it again, weren't you? You became the Wendigo, and they nearly undid you.' IT DID NOTHING. 'But that was not the end of your mistakes. You were already in my head. Telling me lies. Making me weak. But I wasn't weak, and you knew that, too.' She awaited his response as she thought of the image of the little girl that lingered always in the back of her mind, always tormenting her. He said nothing. 'You attacked me. Thought to subjugate me. To walk again in my body since the Wendigo was severed from you. But you were weak!' she suddenly howled in her mind. I WALK AGAIN NOW. I AM THE WENDIGO. He spoke as calmly as ever, just a whisper on the wind, but she heard the fear that he desperately tried to hide. She spoke no longer in her mind, but screamed out loud, "The Wendigo, Storm? He is but a pale reflection of the power I expected! He obeys Snow as you will obey me!" He said nothing, but she felt him recoil at her dismissal of the massive brute that walked among them. She stood, controlling her fear and anger. Calling forth the spiritual power she had been feeding on for those months, she turned to a Silent One who shared her anxiety but was ready to fight. Rasputina said, "Go below. Gather our Sisters. The Acolytes and Priests, too, if they can be found. Let them know that they have nothing more to fear from me." The girl moved quickly, at a run, but Rasputina halted her, saying, "There is no need of haste. December does not come for me. I'm going after Him." The Silent One's eyes were wide, but she nodded. Rasputina's strength and confidence thrilled her. Rasputina turned to the other girl. "Bring Snow here. Be ready. We may need to slay the Wendigo Storm if December does not give in to me quietly." Her teeth clenched, and she growled, "You and our Sisters will indulge upon his flesh. We will quench our great thirst with His spirit. It will be a feast unlike any you have imagined." She spoke more for December to hear. She hoped her actions could match her bravado. But she could wait no longer. She was filled with the spiritual energy of the priests, which gave her the understanding of how to use the power spilling into this world from the puncture of the Event. She must be careful though because December would continue feeding and gathering his strength. She watched as the Silent One ran across the ledge and around an outcropping of large rocks to retrieve Snow and Storm. It was a mistake on her part to send both girls off at once. The moment the girl was out of sight, December struck with the full fury of a Tyrant determined to see His ancient plans fulfilled. The large swirling mass of dark clouds that had spiraled above the mountain since his physical dispatch at the Masamune of Viktoria in the ruins of Kythera suddenly unleashed its pent up fury. A thick column of blinding blue energy erupted from down upon her from its center. Wind and lightning and the very air froze as the fury crashed into her, driving her into the ground with enough force to shake the temple below. She felt her bones break as the pressure lacerated her shoulders and cheeks in long blue lines. She couldn't breathe as the pillar of energy burned through her chest. He was far stronger than she might have imagined. Underestimating the power of a Tyrant such as December would be a mistake she could not overcome. Pain rippled through her body in waves. The weight upon her chest

prevented any hope of breath, and the bright blue energy raining down was constant and strong, showing no sign of faltering until long after she had succumbed to suffocation. He was filling her with his own great and invasive spirit. Deep into her chest he poured, fusing his spirit to hers. Any normal person would not resist as she did; it was futile in the face of one so powerful. But Rasputina was strong. She had felt his vile spirit and knew the loathsome presence. She knew how he would try to consume her, twisting her spirit into his own. She understood starvation and thirst, too. But where that might weaken others, she knew it made her stronger. As He pummeled her with His ancient will, she realized something else. He had waited for her attending Silent Ones to depart before attacking. When He had last attacked her, months earlier, she had used the gathered power of the Event to push Him aside at the last moment, driving Him into Snow, a girl possibly equal in power to her, but silenced by the Priests of December. Had He fully embraced Snow as his vessel, He would never have ascended, never have grown at all. But, releasing His own infused will after the Event, He manifested once again as the Wendigo Storm, hoping

that He could control both it and the invigorated Snow. He was wrong. They were powerful incarnations of Him, but they demonstrated his weakened state. Storm was inferior to Him as Snow was to her. She recognized His fear as He saw her thoughts. It was foreign at first, different than the fear of a human. He was so confident and proud but too anxious, and that anxiety gave her hope. The wind was greater than a hurricane and roared deafeningly against them. Unable to breathe, hardly able to concentrate, her arcane will was more emotional than intellectual, and Rasputina was consumed by rage and hatred. She didn't try to stop his assault but redirected the energy pouring into her chest, turning it into a mighty and massive pillar of ice. As it bore down upon her, its colossal weight would have crushed her, killing her instantly she knew. But she felt December pull it aside at the last moment. She was not shocked. As she guessed, he could not let her die. Too much of him had been invested in her and bending her to accept his great being. The pillar crashed like a cannon blast near her, sending shards of ice into her side. She gasped quickly for air since the weight of the torrent was momentarily diverted, but he redoubled the raging wind. She was dizzy from asphyxiation but used what she had to twist that energy as it came at her, drawing it around herself. She made it hers for a moment and created more ice, but a quickly forming column that lifted her from the ground. When December took his driving force back from her, to lash into her, he could not hit her directly now, and she pushed at it with her mind, attempting to deflect it as she had done months before. But he was too strong. The ice sheath and oblique angle helped stave off the full brunt of his assault, but it would not save her. The spiritual well within her was brimming with power of her own, accumulated and stored like no other in Malifaux had learned to do. She couldn't focus as well as she would like but compensated with an outpouring of hatred and defiance that directed her counter-assault. Such power had never flowed through any human, and the lashing blast of energy was directed at December's attack, breaking the coursing energy into tendrils. But her collected power, vast as it was, paled in comparison to December's. Even weakened after his body fell at Kythera and weakened again when she redirected his consuming will into Snow, he was still many times more powerful than she could comprehend. Her own small lashing tendrils of power dissipated and the washing column of wind and sleet and crackling energy redoubled against her, slicing through her flesh. She was numb to the physical pain and only instinctively struggled to catch her breath, gasping as her head was knocked around in the

gale. The Silent Ones had joined her struggle, but she did not know it. Acolytes, too, were beside her, hurling harpoons ineffectually into December's manifestations. Two priests also joined her, adding their spiritual power and arcane understanding to Rasputina in the trance-like ritual that made them collectively so formidable. Even with them sustaining her, December's assault continued undaunted. A Silent One saw Rasputina struggle for breath, eyes rolling into her head as it lolled back and forth. The Silent One leapt into the torrent and pulled the attack into herself, dragging the beam of energy from Rasputina. December pulled the attack from the brave young girl, but the priests understood what she had done and refocused their combined will against it, holding it against the girl for an additional second before December could wrest it from her and drive it back into Rasputina. As the power of December ravaged the girl's mind, she flailed on the ice, struggling against the pain that wracked her. Where Rasputina had withstood his assault for minutes, it took only seconds to break this weaker vessel, and the mind of the Silent One disappeared beneath the monumental weight of an ancient Tyrant. Her body stretched and twisted. Her arms and legs grew long and reshaped to those more of a wolf than of the woman she was. Her fingernails, very much like claws, thickened and blackened into true sharp talons protruding from her flesh. Her face, once beautiful, became elongated and fanged. She lay there, panting from the wracking change that had ravaged her and consumed her. December's attention had already shifted back to Rasputina. The Silent One was blessed with His presence, but He had discarded her as mere nuisance. Rasputina had only a few seconds to catch her breath. In that small window, she understood how easily this victory would be for Him. He would not kill her, could not, but He would suffocate her and break her ribs until she fell unconscious. Once unconscious, He would deliver himself unimpeded into her, bridging the divide between what He was and what He would be. To truly

live again through her would mark the end of the world— He would devour it all. Storm and Snow were there. Snow was deep in meditative thought, more like Rasputina than any of the others. Arms outstretched, fingers like talons toward the ground, she fought against the gale pummeling Rasputina. The shards of ice within December's attack tore through her flesh, and she gasped at each deep cut, making it more and more difficult to hold her breath. Rasputina pulled ice from the ground in a sudden jerk of her arms, in mounting desperation. The ice formed thick around her body and up over her head in a protective sheath. A small chamber within the ice allowed a few quick breaths. Her head fell weak against the ice as she gathered her strength and steeled her will. December's fury raked long gouges out of her ice encasement, quickly eroding it before Rasputina was ready. Within seconds, it would leave her exposed once more. She braced herself, but there was little she could do to stop it. It grew more and more obvious that their struggle against December was truly futile. She lifted her encased arm, and the ice around it followed her movement. She shielded her face with the armor of her forearm against the onslaught. Unexpectedly, Storm pounced forward, long black talons gleaming in the blinding light of the unleashed energy, tearing huge chunks of ice to reach Rasputina. Rasputina turned in surprise, and the Wendigo howled, its voice long and rumbling. Its eyes flashed with the same blinding blue energy that beat down upon her, now bathing her in its brilliance. As it stared at her, its howl sustained, Rasputina gasped and clutched at her chest in pain that struck her more violently than any she had yet felt. Before the eyes of the acolytes and Silent Ones, her body suddenly changed. Her limbs elongated explosively, and her face, too, narrowed and stretched. Hair

thickened and grew upon her back, all very much like the Silent One that had been briefly touched by December's vast mind and changed by Him. Her will was suppressed by a feral need to feed, an uncontrollable instinct. Weakened already, and exhausted in body and mind, Rasputina was losing herself, consumed by the greater ocean of thought that was December. She was becoming the Wendigo, herself— a creature that harnessed the incomprehensible power of an ancient Tyrant. She would walk and feed like a creature never sated, devouring everything. It was another surprise when the thick harpoon head of one of the acolyte's weapons burst from Storm's midsection, near his side, startling it. The howling caught in his throat, and Rasputina, still changing, fell against the remaining ice of her protective shell, clinging to the last remnants of her self. The harpoon was not nearly enough to fell the beast, but it was Snow that leapt upon the thick harpoon shaft protruding from its back, and jumped to the back of its head, holding herself there by a large clump of its fur. In her other hand, she lifted a dagger, carved from some mineral found in the heart of the mountain devoted to December. It was ceremonial, but strong and sharp. The blade descended, and Snow drove it through the side of Storm's throat. Storm gurgled and recoiled in shock, the glow of its eyes dissipating as the howl rumbled away. She hadn't hesitated and showed no regret at killing the beast that was part of her own psyche. She thrust the blade outward, severing the rest of its throat and its dark blue blood trailed the dagger. As it fell lifelessly to the ice, Snow stepped off of its back and stood defiantly near Rasputina as she fought to revert to her natural form. Cold tears froze to the side of her eyes at the terrible sacrifice of Storm. Rasputina's and Snow's eyes met, each filled with determination and hatred of the Tyrant. They understood one another better than any other around them might. But both knew the end was quickly approaching, and they were feeble obstacles still struggling against a hopeless fight. They readied themselves for the end. Their final struggle against December. Storm's howl was silenced, but December roared on around them. Rasputina loathed Him. Despised the thought of Him consuming her mind and spirit. Loathed the idea of watching His actions from beyond a mental barrier of ice that would forever keep her from living again. She thought of what he had said to her just those few months earlier when she had first come to the temple. When he had first pushed his mind and will against hers. He had said of the Plagued, "He does not have my piece of the key." She never knew what he meant. Never knew what key he needed. But, in the cloud of her memory, she remembered he had also said, "You must be protected." She never understood that, either, but assumed she had some artifact yet to find, like the

Plagued had the box, or the serpent ring that December had shown her in her mind. But she had no item of any physical consequence and refused to hold any of the ceremonial items from the temple like the dagger Snow used to fell Storm. The last of the ice was torn away from the front of her, and she was again fully exposed to the blinding and terrifying might of December as he struck her chest, tearing into her, consuming her anew. Even knowing its futility, those around her were determined to continue fighting, and even die, to stop December's rise, and they renewed their counter-attack. The blue veins that snaked through her upper chest and throat pulsed brightly as her veins pumped the glowing icy fluid that was His blood. Hers had frozen many months ago. His blood coursed through her, changing her into the monster that could house his mind, merely a tool for him. And realization struck even as her mind withered beneath His. The key was not some artifact that might free him like other Tyrants needed. She was the key! More specifically, she realized, it was not

exactly her, but her frozen heart. It held her spirit like a cold, living soulstone. It was the vessel December poured his form into. She felt it throbbing, pumping the frozen essence throughout her wounded and broken body. Within her, she understood his predictions were playing out. He fed off the great power she had been consuming herself these past months. Weak, exhausted, even moments from suffocating, she confronted Him within her mind. 'I will never be yours,' she snarled. I TAKE WHAT I WANT. Aloud she screamed, "Never! You will not have me!" She harnessed those spirits within her, focusing on a final strike at December. December saw it and might have laughed at her ineffectual efforts. She was no danger. Rasputina though, knew that attacking December was wasted effort. He had no physical form to injure. So she drove her power deep within her frozen heart, which accepted the power, as it was meant to. Her last act was a defiant scream, "Never!" against the invading presence. She released the totality of the spiritual force within her, erupting the frozen vessel in an explosion that blasted from her chest. Shards of diamond-hard crystals tore out her chest and back. Several of the Silent Ones were caught in the explosive force and were thrown back, dead. Others were struck by the shrapnel and spun away from the impact. As the sound of the blast echoed around the mountain side, the cascading violence of December's will blinked out of existence. The silence was instant and terrifying. Her followers watched her, standing for a second with her chest torn open. She fell slowly to her knees, and the darkness that had loomed above them for so many months since Kythera broke. Thin patches of pale sun bathed the icy ledge. Her defiant "never" echoed back from the surrounding mountains as she collapsed, face down on the ice.