

Months ago – Early October “It usually does this when I’m about to die,” Leveticus had said, looking at the throbbing green light emanating from the large gem on his staff. Alyce wasn’t surprised by such a statement, nor was she terribly upset. Looking around, however, she said, “So what’re you going to do about it? None of your hollow girls about that you dote over, and don’t even think about trying to claim me when you die.” The orb continued to glow eerily below his face, casting shadows above his bushy brows and crooked nose. “No, dear. Not you. You’re too precious to be discarded so, and your spirit is far too strong to be shunted aside by one such as mine. Besides, I’ll be fine.” She was skeptical, he could see, as she regarded him coldly. “You’ll be fine?” she asked, but it was more of an accusation. He laughed, low and wheezy. “They couldn’t kill me the first time. Not here. Don’t think they could do it back Earthside, either, but I don’t remember testing the theory.” He smiled at her as if the reassurance was enough. “Does anyone ever know what you’re talking about?” she asked spitefully. He shook his head, wondering if she deserved the leniency he always offered. He could never be angry with her, though. “I don’t speak to many people, now do I?” She rolled her eyes. “I wonder why.” He ignored her. Something had drawn him to this spot, and he felt the sense of urgency and anxiety mount. As the sun crested the horizon, spilling its pale light upon them, a bitter wind picked up, whistling at them as if trumpeting the dawn. It was biting, even for that time of year, and the dawn brought no warmth. Surprisingly, Alyce offered no complaint. She stepped closer to Leveticus, eyes wide as she began to sense the dread he could already feel. “What’s going on?” she asked in a whisper. “I’ve been telling you. Trying to explain. Death is approaching.” “Death? Uh... should we leave?” “We cannot run from this.” “You sure?” she asked, her voice rising. “I’m pretty sure we can try!” The feeling of desperation grew within them both. “Are we going to fight, at least?” “I’m not sure we can.” “Maybe you can’t run and maybe you’re not going to fight, but I’m kinda sure I can do both.” He loved her naïve innocence and foolhardy bravado. She readied her pistol, locking the firing gears in place. The sun’s light broke the shadows for only a moment before an unnatural darkness descended from the twisting boughs of the Hanging Tree looming above them. It was a shadow that moved like smoke or fog but was not blown by the wind that intensified around them. Neither had heard the mysterious figure, riding a large white horse, approach from behind the great Tree, but its massive bulk and shod hooves should have rung out upon the rocks and sticks around them. “Tyferal mogulmuertano,” it said from the depth of a shadow beneath its wide-brimmed hat. His voice was at once a coarse whisper but also resonant and booming, like thunder carried on the winds of a storm from far distant. Alyce spun quickly, her pistol leveled upon his narrow chest, but the Rider made no move in response. Leveticus turned slowly, the glow from his staff gently pulsing, as if in time with his slowly beating heart. He glanced at Alyce and saw she was afraid but her gun was held firm, aiming it steadily at the Rider that looked like a man, but both knew immediately he was not. He was not alive, but he did not look like a paltry reanimated corpse such as a Resurrectionist might create, risen in parody of life.

The man atop the horse seemed very much alive. His clothing looked modern, his leather vest buttoned with the gold chain of a pocket watch dangling across his breast. Upon his other breast was fastened a Death Marshal’s badge, and Leveticus, at least, knew he may once, recently, have been a living, breathing, warm-blooded Marshal for the Guild. Now he was Soulless. His face, exposed only in a narrow band above the blue bandana he wore around his lower face, was pale, but not the odd color of a risen cadaver that had the blood and

necrotic fluids beneath the skin slowly decaying. This flesh still pumped blood. But the lack of the soul left it oddly insipid. Leveticus could feel that void left from the empty vessel that once contained the Marshal's soul. It drew in the brightly luminescent spiritual energy that flowed through the cemetery. That emptiness longed to be filled. Leveticus, alone aware of the imbalance and eternal struggle toward entropy, had come to see the desire for equilibrium sought by the loosened spirits of Malifaux. The horse, too, looked unnatural with its stillness, as if it were half asleep. Its sides rose and fell with breath, but its sheen was off – the very hairs of its coat simply devoid of color and as pale as its Rider's skin. Its long mane was matted against its thickly muscled neck and protruding randomly about its skull. Down its back, close to the spine, were thick quills, long thorn-like spikes that erupted from its flesh. The Rider spoke again, its voice like a whistling wind that carried the echo of distant thunder. Alyce had no idea what it was saying. "Do you understand it?" she asked Leveticus. "No, my child. I haven't the faintest clue." "He says you are the key," the high voice of a young girl said from behind Alyce. Leveticus remained stoic, but Alyce, typically combat-ready and seasoned beyond her youth, jumped and spun to face the girl just behind the gravestone near her. "Jessica!" she said, recognizing one of the empty vessels Leveticus acquired and tethered like an anchor between this world and the luminous world beyond. Jessica shouldn't be here, both of them thought, but, as Alyce was about to ignore the girl and turn back to their formidable adversary, an even larger, more gruesome horse and Rider stood enshrouded in the deepening darkness beyond her, the feeble light of the morning sun glinting off armor patinaed with age. This horse stepped forward, the lingering flesh attached to exposed bone, leathery and long dead. As the dead hoof hit the ground, it pressed against a taut wire Alyce had set up earlier – just in case. It triggered a catch on a mechanism hidden behind a nearby tree that released a thick branch that had been pulled far back around the tree. Under such tension, the branch swung around with enough force to break a man's neck. It flew too fast for the Dead Rider to dodge and caught him full in the chest. He didn't move, and the branch hit him as though he were a well-mortared wall. He didn't even seem to notice, though it should have cracked his open ribs at the least. His skeletal hand brushed it aside where it shook behind him. "He found me," the girl said, her voice as calm and flat as always. "Yes, my dear," he said to the young lady he had prepared as a possible vessel, "I suspected as much." Leveticus always wondered why she had been changed over so much easier than the others, almost willingly giving up her spirit to his necromantic arts. She was already likened to death, and damnation, he realized. She was long ago destined to find him, though he had always thought she had been his discovery. All the while he thought about Jessica being a tool for a higher power, he never took his eyes from the Pale Rider that first approached them. Alyce shot a nervous sideways glance at Leveticus. "You knew about this?" she exclaimed. "Not exactly. Though I've been expecting something for a long time." "Maybe you could have offered a bit of a warning?" and she took a step toward him. His eyes still unmoving, he held out his mechanical hand, stopping her as he said, "I have been trying." The Pale Rider spoke again in his breezy whisper, and Jessica translated automatically. "The Red Cage has fallen," she said in echo of the Rider. "It has torn a hole between this world and the next." Her voice flat and her face as emotionless as always. The Rider continued, "It was foretold. The end has come. You are the key." Alyce's eyes widened as she stepped back, planning to escape beyond the Hanging Tree if it came to that. Never taking her eyes from the two Riders confronting her.

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Leveticus, she did not know that a third stood silently behind her. As soon as she stepped against the muscular chest of the animal, she spun quickly to face the new threat, nearly tripping on a gravestone as she stumbled backward. She looked up into the dimly glowing red eyes of a monstrous creature that may once have been a horse but now looked much more like a walking nightmare. Like her, its body was a combination of metal, wires, gears, and pistons, held together with a little flesh. It snorted hotly upon her, and she staggered back. The Rider, though, did not acknowledge her, instead facing Leveticus. She could not see its face, obscured by a great hooded cowl surrounding the head, bathing it in deep, impenetrable darkness. The thick hood was attached to a tattered cloak that fluttered behind it in the wind, but billowed slower than it should have, as if it were out of step in time, and the Rider rested a sword upon his shoulder. "The one that has crossed into the aether," Jessica droned on. The massive sword of the Hooded Rider was easily as long as a full grown man, but its mass was not what startled her most. Where the tattered cloak billowed slowly behind it, the sword's metal reflected the sky and sun above. But the sunlight could not penetrate the darkness that had descended and enveloped them, and even more remarkable was the reflection, disjoint from time, reflecting the passing sun far too quickly as it arced on the gleaming surface in seconds rather than hours. "You are the key," Jessica said. "The end is nigh. The dead have returned to this world. There will be pain. There will be suffering. We are awake as was foretold." Leveticus studied the Pale Rider from beneath thick bushy eyebrows. He asked, "And me? What's my role in this?" Jessica spoke as the Pale Rider said, "You will direct us." Then the Hooded Rider spoke, his voice like rocks grinding together, and Jessica said, "But first you must die." So startlingly fast was his lunge forward that Alyce had no time to move at all and did nothing to protect him. His great sword, now abnormally reflecting the darkness of night as the blade slid easily through Leveticus and out the back of his torso. Leveticus looked down at the dark blade sinking through his stomach. "Ah, dammit," he gurgled, and blood spat from his mouth. "I hate this part." The blade sank deeper, its width nearly severing him at the waist. The Hooded Rider jerked and the sword came free of Leveticus' body, which fell, dead, his blood flowing freely beneath the Hanging Tree. Its roots greedily drank the blood, drawing it into the soil as quickly as it poured from the great wound in his torso. Alyce stood between the three and Leveticus, her pistol ringing. CCC With Jessica there, he'd have a few moments to fulfill the necromantic purpose he had conditioned her for. He could already feel that undeniable pull, drawing him inexorably toward that comfortable and eternal bliss where he would join the multitude of voices and thoughts of all those that had already found solace in the rainbow world of the aether. But he was not ready. Unlike so many that died before they were ready, Leveticus had determined the answers regarding life and death. As one that experienced the rapturous joy of that other world and renounced its lure, he alone mastered the return to the life he had left behind. He had first done so long ago. At that time, he had a vision that needed to be fulfilled and a girl he loved that needed his protection and guidance. Now, so many years later, most of his original schemes had been fulfilled or, he would admit, were forgotten. And the girl? As decades piled upon decades, he would also admit that perhaps she was gone, too, though he still tried to convince himself that she was still there with him, as pure and innocent and unharmed as always. Time was distorted while he lingered between worlds. It stretched out in a patient crawl as he could perceive them, those in the world of the living, moving like lazy, languid sloths, ironically like ghostly apparitions from his point of view, though it was he who was

the disembodied spirit. He would need to move quickly if he were to save Alyce from the Riders. He saw Jessica's tether line; her soul pulled from her and stretched out from this world and into the aether. It was thin, fragile, and almost imperceptible, but he would grasp hold of it with his spirit, clutch tight as the great void of the aether dragged him into its warm embrace. Then, if he could maintain his wits, focus, and will, drag his way back, pulling his

tired spirit out of that beautiful place hand over weak hand, back into the cold and dying world again, into the empty vessel of Jessica to live once more. They moved so slowly, and he was so fast now, in death, but it would still be many moments later in their world before he could return. It would be a long, long time for him. And it would be excruciating. As he latched onto that faint tether connected to the girl, he let go of his hold on the real world and his life, prepared to be consumed by the aether. As his spirit flew toward the pinhole tunnel, the gray fog image of the Hooded Rider swept around, pulling his sword from the remains of the body that was no longer of any use. It swung before Leveticus' spirit, still slowly, but his own spirit dragged to a halt just as it passed. The weapon, out there in the real world, should have had no effect on him or the shadows to which he now belonged, but it struck the transparent spiritual tether, pulling it in its wake. As the sword completed its arc, the tether had grown taut and dense. It quivered in space before him as he moved down its length, heading into the ethereal abyss, vibrating slower and slower as his spirit grew closer to the sword. Quick thoughts stretched into seconds which dragged into minutes. The Rider's sword began to pull away, but Leveticus could do nothing save hold tight to the tether. If he released it, he would be gone forever, lost in the void. He braced himself, trying to close his eyes though that was impossible in this place. Perception was not conducted through the traditional senses any longer. The sword would not be drawn away quickly enough, and Leveticus struck it. As he did, the tether snapped, cut, impossibly, and the line flew toward the ethereal gulf, finally released. He would be lost, he knew immediately, in the endless abyss. He was helpless to stop it this time and tried to think of a fond memory of his life, now about to be torn from him, finally. No fond thought came. Not even of the girl he so adored. But his spirit, striking the massive weapon of the Hooded Rider that existed in both worlds at once, did not continue toward the aether. Instead, it was like he struck a solid barrier and bounced back with a jarring lurch. It was another impossibility that he added to the bewildering circumstances befalling him. Panic mounted. No other tether lines were near him, none of his hollow vessels prepared to receive him, to give him life again, were close enough for him to latch onto. And he seemed stuck in that shadow place where images of the Riders, Alyce, and Jessica were wispy and dream-like visions. Lines and shapes of those in that realm, the real world of Malifaux, blurred and stretched, even shook in a vibration that made it difficult to perceive one object from another. He had no heart to beat in pace with his growing anxiety, which only added to his feeling of separation and isolation. When the face of a Rider leaned close to his disembodied apparition, coming into clarity and seeming to stare right at him, he wanted to scream or flee but could do neither. It was the cold clean face of the Pale Rider, he realized, staring at him with soulless eyes from that other world. The other two Riders came closer as well, and their features clarified as they regarded him. They spoke with one another in the alien language he did not know. He had thought, before, that it was an ancient Neverborn tongue, but now realized it was very different. They conferred with one another, and he was sure it was in judgment of him. Was this his final judgment was to come, he wondered. By Riders of death sent to drag him to hell for what he had done? He

deserved it; that was certain. The Pale Rider spoke to him, his voice terrible and commanding. A faint echo followed, carried from Jessica into this world like a daydream. He could not be certain of what she said but thought he understood her to say, "They must be punished. They have brought imbalance." Her voice was too weak, too far away, and too damned monotone for him to really understand. That was his fault, though, tearing her spirit out made her apathetic. She might have said, "You will lead us. To bring an end," but couldn't be sure. "How?" he asked, meaning he couldn't currently do much at all. "Go to her," the Rider said. "Who?" he asked, but he knew already and did not like the answer. "The one who commands life."

His spirit lurched, flying through that misty world without substance like a bullet, though he did not will it. In fact, he fought to stop the flight that brought him quickly to the bayou and the Hag – one of the few people that might deserve both death and damnation even more than himself. MMM There was no deceleration when he came to an abrupt halt. He had traversed many miles in the span of several moments and then simply stopped. The movement and sudden lack of it did not jar him physically, of course; the movement was merely perception for him, now, although his mind tried to translate what it might have expected or understood about movement, which added to the foreign experience. His surroundings were still that jerky fog of shadow and mist blurred and blended with hints of images from the world of the living that existed just beyond his full comprehension. Still, he could see the vague shapes of the foliage, dense and vibrant and full of life. He could sense it even more acutely in this disjoint world between life and death. He was in the heart of the bayou. Finding Zoraida would be nearly impossible, especially now, with his perception of her world so full of static and confusion. But his vision seemed to come slowly into focus, almost incrementally allowing him to see some of his surroundings if he remained still and calm. Before him, he was now certain, was her hut raised above the bog on thick poles, with vines snaking up and around them as if longing to reach the woman above. He could see the aura of life emanating from them like a faint green glow. The living had an aura that pulsed and throbbed, and he could see it, but only in his mind. It was very much like perceiving the power of a soul stone, he realized, and understood at once how logical that was. Only a rare few could perceive that power, even when holding one in their hands, much less understand how to draw the released power of a broken stone into their being, to fuse the power to their own spirit and harness it. Even when crushing the milky white stone in their hand, they'd feel little more than a quick shock as though it were the snap of static electricity. He could feel it all around him now. All the life energy enervated him, thrilled him, and called to him. He understood that the problem with "looking" around him for visual clues was so confusing because he was trying to perceive things with human perception, eyes that he no longer had. Focusing on the power of the spiritual energy that surrounded living things allowed him to see much more clearly though, at first, it seemed very much like trying to read a book with his eyes crossed and confused him as he tried to refocus his vision. To his left, just within his peripheral perception, near a mound of soft mud and dirt, the surface quickly frozen over by the snap of frost that had descended upon Malifaux, he saw the bright green glow of someone clearly infused with great life. No doubt, one still young and vibrant and full of that energy of youth. But no young human should be near Zoraida's hut, and a Neverborn would not emanate as a human because their life forces were measured much differently. He studied the glowing figure more intently, and the soft feature of a young woman slowly

became clear. She was beautiful, too, he was pleased to see. Further pleasing was her noticeable lack of attire, even in such frosty cold. Mere rags covered her upper body and around her shapely hips, leaving so much of her bare flesh for his thirsty eyes to explore. She was held aloft, nearly a foot above the ground, by the throbbing green glow of life that both emanated from her and was drawn to her from the bayou, itself. Her head was thrown back and her soft arms were outstretched and back, calling his attention to her every womanly curve. "Heh," he spoke. "Even in death I've time for a beauty like this," and he chuckled, finding amusement even in his own lecherous attitude. In his disembodied state he did not believe he could be heard nor seen, but the girl's head snapped forward toward him, and her eyes popped open, glowing brightly with the same pulsing energy that enveloped her. When she spoke, her voice resonated, infused by that power. "And you haven't changed a bit, old man," she said, which caused him to start. Still having no control over his movement, he didn't realize that he floated away from her, scrambling back, as it were. How did she see him? Hear him? Recognize him? She smiled sinisterly, still staring at him with glowing eyes. 246  
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"Who? Who are you?" he asked. She laughed, loud and hearty, and her voice was deep and sultry. He tried not to notice how intoxicating she was. Her hair was pulled up tightly and wound on her head in a bun, clearly to get the thick black locks out of her way although stray strands fell about her round cheeks. The insects, amphibians, and small bayou reptiles moving around below her finally made him realize: this was Zoraida. "I don't understand," he spoke, baffled at her youth and, now he hesitated to think it, her great beauty. "He said you would come," the young Zoraida said. "Who?" Leveticus was growing exasperated. His mind was fatigued, and he had gone through such a bevy of emotions in such a short time that he was frankly no longer used to experiencing. He just wanted answers. "Who?" he demanded, no longer concerned at all about how he spoke, much less how she could hear him. "The Hooded Rider." "You understand them?" "No. But 'Leveticus' translated well enough. I guessed they'd be bringing you here kicking and screaming." "I would have come along on my own." She laughed again. "I see they had other plans for you. Stripped you of your ugly parts," she said, meaning his mechanical limbs and organs that she found so repulsive. "Just the raw man." She laughed again, warm and thick, but he recognized the familiar intonation of each note and how it would eventually grow dry and shrill, becoming the cackle of the old woman. "Very raw. Why is this happening?" "Oh, how the tables have turned! Now it is Leveticus asking me for answers! How delicious. How thrilling. I'm more surprised you didn't recognize me. Isn't this the memory you have of me? How you found me so long ago?" "No. I've forgotten. Forgotten all about you." "Lies. Like I said: you haven't changed at all." "Just tell me what's happening!" he snapped. The glow of her eyes slowly subsided, returning to the deep, dark brown that regarded him with far more warmth than she genuinely felt toward him. "And no lies from you, either. No manipulation. Just the truth." "Ah," she said, sneering at him as she floated closer, her toes dangling below her. He pushed the inviting image of her ankles, calves, and thighs from his mind, chastising himself for being so distracted by her. It was very difficult. "Truth is but perception. Manipulation is just encouraging another to make the decision they already want to make. Free will." The Riders were coming, he knew. He could hear them, or feel them – perceive them, at least, galloping toward them. "Perhaps they've given you to me, like this, knowing that your spirit is still very strong, filled with the lingering power of the aether that you've waded through time and time again. But you're

powerless to defend yourself against me. Imagine how easily I could take you in, twist you into my spirit, absorb you like a soulstone. Wouldn't you give quite a rush?" He knew she wasn't lying. She could do that. Any who had mastered soulstone use could do that to him now. He couldn't get away. He still could not control his movement and merely hovered in place futilely, hoping desperately that she wouldn't do it. Being absorbed into her spirit, to be consumed by her, was loathsome despite the allure her new body presented. She said with a grimace, "But absorbing you into my spirit sounds fairly loathsome though you do look a bit more inviting without all the mechanika." It was an odd reflection of his own thoughts and he wondered if she could read his mind like she could read the cards. "I believe I'm meant to teach you what I've learned," she continued, "though I'm unsure of your role in this." "They said I'm supposed to lead them. To bring about an end. To punish those responsible for the imbalance." His words stripped the smile from her face and seemed to genuinely shock her. "Perhaps so," she said at last. "Perhaps that is what this is about after all." "I don't think we can stop them. Not willingly. 'Free will,' you had said. Funny that one such as you, us, in fact, might still believe in free will. Fate rules our every action."

She continued his thought, "And evoking our free will, twisting fate, that has led to this, the end we must face. The end we must bring about." "What are you supposed to teach me?" She smiled again as the three Riders found them, two glowing spirits facing one another in the cold bayou. "I'm not sure what they hoped I would teach you. But, I intend to learn how to stop a Tyrant Entity." "I did not think that was possible. You tried to do that to December with the girl and her sword. It failed. In fact, I think it only pissed Him off." Zoraida nodded, not even trying to defend herself against the accusation of failure. "I said 'stopped'. I no longer think they can be killed. Not like we think of death. Actually, now it makes sense, your part in this. They are like you." "What? Me? How?" She regarded him coldly, accusing him of something with judgmental eyes. "Yes," she said, her eyes squinting, her lips pursed. "Like you. They are not physical. Not any longer. Not even when they take physical form like December did at Kythera or the Plagued did just months ago. They draw their power from the aether and from us, like we draw it from the stones." She looked away from him, thinking, and then spoke more to herself. "Is that what happened to this world? They devoured it, spirit by spirit?" She seemed to jump, her eyes growing wide. She looked to her hands and down her body at the glowing spiritual energy she drew from the bayou, feeding upon its energy, consuming it and twisting it into her being. She bowed her head as if ashamed at her new understanding. She turned back to him, angry, but at herself. "They're like us. Like us all. Feeding off of the power without regard for our actions. It's no wonder we will pay." She looked at the Riders and their unnatural mounts beyond the floating apparition of Leveticus. "But I don't intend to go without a fight. I don't intend to pay more than I must." She turned back to Leveticus. "Soulstones are easy," she said. "You hold them, break them, release the spiritual energy they contain, and absorb it. But you, more than any other, know this isn't the source of greatest power." "The aether," he spoke. She nodded. "The aether." "It was torn. The fabric separating it from this world and from Earth. Its power spills into this place. But for the Tyrants. It fuels them because this world has grown so barren. There is not enough to feed the appetites of the Tyrants. They need the power of the aether to give them strength. So that they might ascend. Become independent of life and the world of the living, but not lost – absorbed by the multitude in the aether. To resist it, feed on it, rule that place." "But they aren't the only ones that can use that power. We learned to use soulstones,"

she said with a smile. "We can use this, too. To siphon it from the world even as it gets absorbed into the fabric of this world." "But they're using it already. I feel it. And they know how to use it already." "True. But we're linked to them even if we don't know it. They choose us. Use us. Like we often create or summon totems that allow us to harness our power through them." "I don't. I'm not a fool." She regarded him again. "No, you don't, do you? Never a totem like the rest of us. Is that why you were chosen, I wonder? Connected to life and death but never the compulsion to link with a manifestation of your own spirituality? Has no Tyrant found you, drawing from your power, I wonder? We can leech the power not just from the world being flooded by that spiritual energy; we can take it from them, harness it. Just as they hope to leech from us and consume us, to walk among the living by subjugating our bodies and minds as their own." "You think we can learn to do this?" She motioned toward her own body which he was all too willing to look at. He wondered briefly why she wasn't cold. She sure wasn't wearing much. "Why did you make yourself young? Never mind how you did it." "I needed to revert to an earlier time when I had different mastery over Fate. Before the threads became too entangled. When I could see the fabric more clearly. I didn't actually set out to become young."

"Fine. We gather more aetheric power than we've ever harnessed at once. And then what? Once we learn how to do this we fight the Tyrants? Teach all the others how to do this?" "I don't know. Let's begin by learning how to manifest this power and become something even greater. See if we can master this." "Something's in this for you. There's always something you're plotting." "Yes, always something." He would listen to her, see if he could absorb the aether flooding the world since the event. More than anyone, he knew of it. Now, disembodied, just a spirit himself locked in the world of the living, he could see the pools of aether coalescing around them. Around all things. Longing to be part of that great collective voice they were now separated from.