

October 15 Hoffman hadn't left the Guild compound at the end of the day, and the fire in the coal furnace on the floor beneath him had diminished so that little heat radiated from the iron grills in the floorboards. Even the wick in his kerosene lamp flickered as if struggling against the encroaching cold. The wind outside blew strong from out of the north, and everyone that talked about it said it was unnatural. As it was his first autumn in Malifaux, he wouldn't know. Everything in Malifaux seemed uncomfortable to him. He pushed the case files across his desk and rubbed his upper arms to increase circulation. He had read the same sentence perhaps a dozen times in the last hour but couldn't really focus on the meaning of the text. He looked across the room at the grotesque form of his brother standing almost motionless, save the rising and falling of his chest, silently staring at him. He had been like that since he had come wandering into the Guild compound unannounced, frightening even seasoned Guardsmen and deputized marshals who had gathered around him. Although hulking and well-armed, he made no threatening gesture, even when shackled. Only when he was led to the holding cells below the compound did he resist, easily breaking his bonds, and he strode directly to his younger brother's workrooms. The guards escorting him, though puzzled and alert, were somehow unthreatened and followed him all the way to Hoffman where he simply stood, much more like a construct awaiting instructions than a freethinking man. That was weeks ago. Ryle stood where Hoffman instructed him to, unmoving for hours, even if Hoffman left to attend other business. If Hoffman didn't return by dusk, Ryle would then go stomping down the halls, drawn to him, his boots ringing on the wood with all the resounding commotion of a horse trotting through the halls. "Mr. Hoffman," the Governor General's Secretary, Lucius, said from behind him, "Working late?" Hoffman jumped, believing he was alone in the investigator's room, if not the entire commissioned officer's offices. He twisted as best he could to see Lucius who remained directly behind him, as if purposely beyond Hoffman's ability to get him in his sight. "Yes," he said, as casually as he could muster. "Just trying to get my head around some things that have been puzzling me." He fidgeted in the wooden chair, pulling at the brass rod of his body brace digging into his side. He hoped Lucius would not take notice of the files on Henry the mining Steamborg, Nicodem the Undertaker, Colonel Mathews, and others in Malifaux with self-articulated mechanical prosthetics. It was his charge to investigate each of them for possible ties to growing rebellious groups rumored to practice the darkest and most illegal activities, as decreed by highest law. Of course, much of that was recent supposition on the part of Hoffman. He had been charged with stamping out all illegal practices of bio-mechanical grafting, but almost all of the men he and his deputies apprehended had been quickly released after a brief interrogation by Guild lawyers that answered not to him, but directly to Lucius. Lucius and the bevy of lawyers regularly inquired about Ramos, of course. His file was on Hoffman's desk, too, thick but buried beneath the others. So much evidence pointed to him, but he somehow always had some alibi or excuse to explain all of his activities. Even his work in bio-engineering mechanical grafting was conducted on grants from Old World universities, always on men destined for death unless he intervened last minute to save them in desperation, and always accompanied Guild regulations on registering the work. In the case of Ryle, Hoffman suspected he was commanded by Ramos to go to his brother, creating quite a blatant slap in his face. Hoffman now wondered if the accident that consumed Ryle was not entirely an accident. So much of the events now confronting him and other officers made it difficult to pursue Ramos. It was so perfectly packaged. As if reading his thoughts, Lucius said, "I see your poor brother still watches over you. Or does he look to

you for help? To bring him back into the light of normal men?" An odd thing for him to say, Hoffman thought, since he had never seen the Secretary fully in the light, either. "I wouldn't know," he said. "You, of all people, know how I feel about the grafted." "Yes. Of course. I can only imagine the pain he must cause you: a constant reminder to what you have lost." He didn't believe Lucius could empathize with any of those things, true though they were. "A shame he must only stand about like that. He is well-armored, I notice. Quite a gift. Just handed to us, too." Hoffman said nothing. "I'll see if we can get some use out of him," Lucius said. Odd, Hoffman thought, again, that it was a declaration rather than a request. "Be my guest. But he seems to only obey me." "I wouldn't worry about that. I'm sure he'll follow my commands." He let the thought linger. Breaking the awkward silence, he then said, "In the meantime, I have some new material for you to examine," as he dropped a book on the desk before him. It was larger than a typical text, and the edges were peeling and worn. "From Sonnia Criid's collection," he said loudly. More loudly than necessary, Hoffman thought, given the solitary environment. "One of the few left intact from the excavation of the temple at Nythalm." "Nythalm? South of Kythera, right?" "Yes. Beyond the bayou." "What does this have to do with me, sir?" "It has notes of particular interest to you, actually. Your charter." "Grafting? Bio-mechanical grafting? But the book looks— old." "Yes. Very. It's Neverborn, of course. Criid and her staff have translated much of it, though the science and schematics will likely make more sense to you." Hoffman nodded. "You want me to continue translating?" Lucius inhaled sharply. "Yes. And report to me, immediately, any indication of where the Neverborn might have conducted these experiments. Criid has a fascination with it, apparently. We'd like to track her down, too." Thumbing through the tome quickly, he saw drawings of bodies, human looking, with many cross-section images of mechanika that made little sense to him and the way he had come to understand the connective techniques by which the nervous system linked to the machinery. Criid's handwritten notes in the margins would be interesting, but his heart leapt as he neared the end of the book. The connective imagery might have been ancient to the Neverborn, but to him, it was revolutionary. Even progressive, blending abstract sister sciences in a way he hadn't imagined possible. He was about to say something about it when he saw a strange symbol drawn on the inside of a corpse near the arcane interface at the base of its spine. It stopped his heart and time, too, seemed to freeze. He recognized the symbol as a signature, and although it was refined and included a new line and a curve, it was a symbol he had seen before. He closed the book with a snap, and in his excitement, he nearly fell out of his chair. "Interesting?" Lucius asked, clearly aware of its importance. Hoffman said nothing, his mind racing with hundreds of questions. Lucius left him and walked to Ryle, speaking to the hulking husk of a man in low tones that didn't carry across the room. Hoffman pressed himself up from his chair and locked his brace at the knees. He hobbled quickly from the room. Ryle didn't follow and wouldn't. Lucius gave Hoffman a sidelong glance as he quickly departed, and he sneered. The book remained on his desk, but he moved as quickly as he could to his own lab to look through other books similarly unearthed on the topic of grafting, though much less specific. He nearly stumbled in the hall, such was his haste. The symbol marked in that ancient book was almost identical to the one Ramos used on his own grafted works. RRR

As Hoffman stumbled into his lab to frantically find evidence collected to verify his newfound supposition, across the street in the Guild Sanitarium, Lady Justice struggled to regain

consciousness for the first time since the observatory had exploded and collapsed upon her almost two months prior while she fought against hundreds of walking dead and Plagued victims. She drifted in and out of near wakefulness throughout the night. As the first of the sun's rays broke the eastern horizon, her eyes snapped open revealing twin, milky-white orbs, looking remarkably like infused soulstones. She blinked unseeingly, forever in darkness despite the yellow light spilling into her room. She tried to sit and her breath caught in her chest as if knocked from her. She coughed reflexively and it led to a violent wracking that shook her as thick mucus and dried blood came up. She couldn't reclaim her breath, and she blacked out once more, still wheezing and choking. When she awakened again, it was mid-morning. She took longer to evaluate her surroundings and state of health. Her right arm was strapped to her side, and her breath came in desperate shallow gasps. Her clothing had long been replaced by a short gown. She reached out with her left hand, groping not only for her sword and pistol belt, but, most importantly, the black bandana she wore over her eyes. Without these tools she felt weak and exposed. When she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, she was again wracked with a cough that threatened to incapacitate her. Wet and phlegmatic, she coughed painfully and reeled. Her feet were unsteady, and she could not focus the strange images in her mind that allowed her to walk, blind, through the unfamiliar building. She groped helplessly before her and around the corner of the doorframe and staggered weakly into the hall. Several nurses were quickly upon her, urging her to return to bed. She refused around choking gasps. Doctor Carl Morrow, too, was summoned, but she batted his pressing hands away somewhat ineffectually. "Back to your bed, now," he said. She struggled to speak, but her words came below the rattling cough as she said, "I am Lady Justice!" in a wheeze. "Yes, yes," he said patronizingly. Attempting to push her back into her room, though, was met with a slap against this shoulder that might have been meant for his face. He stepped away from it easily, which further bewildered her. She shoved past him, but he caught her around the waist and started to struggle as she fell against him, too weak from the cough to continue. "There, there," Morrow said, gently stroking her thick hair, somewhat knotted from months of bedrest. "That's my good girl," he crooned. "Let her be, doctor," a commanding voice said behind him. She recognized the voice as that of one of the Ortega boys, but she didn't know Santiago or Francisco well enough to discern which. They were both there, she knew, but she could only vaguely perceive them in her mind. The doctor stood, releasing her and turned to face the men. "Officer Francisco. We'll not have any trouble out of you today--" "So long as you don't get disagreeable," Francisco said, cutting him off. "She needs to be back in bed. Her injuries--" "Are beyond you. She's Lady Justice. If she wants to go on a stroll, we'll let her." As he spoke, Santiago had approached her and put her groping hand upon his shoulder. Her lower lip actually trembled, and she looked broken, even scared. It was an image neither man would ever forget. She coughed up blood, and her head rolled against him as she fell against his protective bulk. He regretted the bandana around his neck was filthy with his sweat and the dust of the trail, but they had been back and forth from Latigo to the City numerous times in the past months and his hygiene was never a priority. He pulled it from his neck and wrapped the gingham fabric over her eyes, knowing the blue checkered pattern was far from what she would prefer. As soon as he pulled the knot tight, Justice righted herself, standing free of him. Her coughing grew steady, and finally she controlled it so that it was nothing more than a nuisance. Her bare feet were planted firmly, too, and she rose, standing as tall as either brother. Exposed, wearing no more than the gauzy gown and a dirty rag over her eyes, she regained the inspiring

confidence that few could withstand. It was her unflinching, unseeing judgment of the truth. It gave her unparalleled strength. The binding over her eyes gave her clarity and purpose. She could see the truth and knew her purpose again.

Santiago turned to smile at Francisco. They may have both wished it was Perdita standing there before them, but seeing Justice standing tall and proud gave them hope. Her breath was still shallow, but she spoke quietly and evenly when she asked, "Where's my Judge?" Francisco said, "Down the hall. He's in worse shape than you, though. Still in a coma." "The Quarantine Zone? The – whatever that was; the wave?" "They call it 'The Event'. No one knows. Laid out Perdita, too. She's up a floor. But the building you were fighting in came down, blown up by whoever took up residence there." "Resurrectionist." "Prob'ly. But speculation on some plagued fella, too. Not Res." She nodded, putting the pieces of her memory back into place. "Why do I keep thinking of Ramos? Dr. Ramos? Was he there, in the Zone? I cannot get him out of my head." The brothers looked at one another uncomfortably. The doctor and nurses withdrew, silently attending to other matters of their station. At least, that's what they pretended. "What?" she asked. Francisco stepped toward her. "Lady," he said, his voice low. "Your injuries – they were fatal." She coughed, though more gently than before, more in control. "You're not going to like this. Your whole side was crushed. Your ribs. A lung. You were dying." The thought of that man replacing part of her with something unnatural was more than repulsive. It was akin to damnation. She was unsure how, but she had the recurring image of him wielding great magics and conducting horrific experiments upon the flesh. Her flesh. The images plagued her, going deep into her memory, back to the attack at the observatory in the Quarantine Zone. They had danced through her mind while she remained comatose. "Ramos." She sighed and shook her head, feeling despair pressing down upon her. She could barely stand, and her breath came in raspy gasps. Her arm was limp in the sling and could not grasp a darned needle much less her great sword. For once, she was uncertain of her fate and her purpose. She needed her sword. The weight upon her shoulder would make her feel like herself. "Where are my weapons?" she asked, weak, more as an afterthought. "And your clothes, I suppose," Santiago suggested, although he appreciated the thought of her walking about bare legged. She didn't seem to care. The three rather quickly found her weapons and the dirt-stained and torn attire she had worn in combat those several months earlier. Justice walked right to the locked chest that contained them, striding past confused and protesting doctors and aides into a back room. The boys spun away from her when she pulled the gown over her head, showing little concern for modesty. Buckling the last buckle on her boot, high on her calf, she said, "Will you men ride with me?" "Of course," Francisco said without hesitation. "Where?" "A visit to Viktor Ramos. Help me with my sword." Santiago helped sling it over her good shoulder. "But your arm?" he said. "Can you wield it?" She gnashed her teeth, feeling impotent. "I can still fire a gun. But I need my sword." "Are we arresting him?" Francisco asked of Ramos. "I'm not sure he'll come along willingly. Killing him maybe in order." It was high noon when they crested the small hill overlooking the Miners and Steamfitter's Union offices near the Hollow Marsh Excavation site. Justice rode with Santiago, reluctantly acknowledging her reliance upon him given her weakened state. He was proud at first to carry her but grew quickly uncomfortable. He had no good way to ride, not wanting to put his arms around her and grasp the saddle horn or reins, though she was silent and stoic no matter what he did. He almost wished she

would simply chastise him and tell him exactly what to do. Typically so full of bravado himself, he wasn't easily intimidated. Never by a woman.

Despite the mounting tension, Francisco saw his brother's discomfort, squirming on the saddle behind her, and he reveled in it, winking at Santiago every time his younger brother looked over at him. The sun stood high in the sky, casting a pale light, but it offered little warmth. The October wind blew cold out of the north. Santiago pulled his duster around Justice who refused a coat of her own. She neither reacted to the cold nor had a reaction to Santiago trying to keep her warm. They were all surprised to find Hoffman standing on the trail before them, strapped to a mechanical armature, a feline-like construct standing beside him, and a bird-like one gliding above. He just stood there, looking down the hill at the office building. He wore his finest clothes, including a silk vest, a gold chain dangling from the watch in his breast pocket, and an expensive gentleman's bowler resting upon his bald head. The coat he wore was a thick woolen gentleman's coat, imported from his far away home near London. Francisco had heard of the relationship between Hoffman and Ramos. As they rode up beside him he said, "Don't get in our way, Hoffman." It was bold of him to address the higher ranking officer so, but he was emboldened by Lady Justice, speaking for her. "We intend to confront Viktor Ramos." Francisco was unsure exactly why they were, but such was the silent power of Justice's command. "I'm not here to stop you, Mr. Ortega. I'm here for the same thing." "To bring him in?" Francisco asked. "To kill him?" Santiago offered more hopefully. He had nothing against the Union boss. He was just itching for the opportunity to do what he did best. It was Justice who answered. She said, "To ask questions. To get answers." Hoffman nodded. "I'm not expecting this to be easy. He has at least one bodyguard near him always. The big Indigena, Joss, for one. But more, the miners will be loyal, even to their death. And he has an arsenal of constructs that even I cannot duplicate." Santiago said, "But if you can get him alone, nobody guards--" Justice sat upright in the saddle before him and said, "He's more than he seems, isn't he, Hoffman?" The frail man merely nodded. The Ortigas understood at once. They walked down the trail in a line, their horses left behind, lashed to a branch. Hoffman's mechanical attendant allowed him to walk in step beside Justice, his Hunter construct clicking alongside him. Miners outside the tunnels ceased their labors to regard the high-ranking Guild officers striding down the hill toward them. It wouldn't be the first time one of their ranks had been arrested by the Guild. But these were a different sort than the common Guild Guardsmen that carried out a basic arrest. Everyone had a heroic idolatry of the Ortigas, men familiar to all people in Malifaux for their steadfast vigilance against the Neverborn that threatened them. Lady Justice, too, was well known to the miners. Her thick mane billowed in the cold wind even after she had haphazardly cut so much of the knotted locks away. It flowed over the sword dangling loosely from her shoulder at her lower back. Still, the presence of the Guild descending upon them was met with unease. One bulky steamfitter, his arms bulging beneath a dark sweater, took up his mighty mallet and rested it upon his shoulder, showing no sign of returning to work. His name was Johan, and the steamfitters near him, tightening thick screws along a failing seam that released a torrent of bright steam, lifted their tools as well, all heavy weapons in their meaty hands. It was Hoffman, surprisingly, that spoke in a commanding tone, his voice carrying throughout the camp. "At ease, men!" His militant tone belied his small frame and the crippled demeanor vanished as if an illusion. "Return to your work. Johan," he said to the lead steamfitter, "get your men back on that tank. The drill won't work if it can't hold the

pressure.” He smiled and winked at the bulky man who continued to regard them coldly. Turning to a group of miners gathering at the main cave entrance, he said, “Mr. Creedy. Back to work. All of you, back to work!” Santiago was impressed. All but Johan did as instructed. He stood resolute, staring at them, unafraid and undaunted. At a small side-mine, Hank the spidery Steamborg strode from the dark depths, the sharp metal points of his great legs striking the rocks with resounding cracks. Like Johan, he stood at the entrance, unmoving but vigilant.

They hoped to confront Ramos inside his office, a wooden building every bit as large as a frontier home. As if expecting them, however, he stepped out of the office to confront them from the wooden rail of the small porch. “Cold day,” Ramos said to them by way of greeting. “Perhaps I can fetch you some tea? Coffee?” The Ortegas naturally deferred to Lady Justice to lead them, but Hoffman again surprised them by stepping forward. “We should speak within, Professor. Not in front of all of these men.” Ramos smiled falsely. “No. I think we can conduct our business here, beneath the sun.” “Very well,” Justice said. Her left hand rested upon the gun at her hip. The Ortegas, too, had their hands upon their holstered Peacebringers. It was a formidable line, and almost any man in Malifaux would crumble in fear against such a group. Ramos remained too confident, almost too prepared for the encounter. It set them on edge to confront a man that didn’t naturally bend to their intimidating presence. “What did you do to me, Ramos?” she demanded of him. “Saved you,” he replied without hesitation. “Or damned me. Why?” “Why? Your life was endangered. Our good man, Mister Hoffman, here, convinced me of your valor. Your importance.” He emphasized the last word strangely, whether sarcastically or in sincere acknowledgement of Justice’s worth, the Ortegas could not be sure. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Not without personal gain. Did you think it would absolve you of crimes against Guild statutes?” “Yes,” he said matter-of-factly. He continued, saying, “Isn’t it interesting that I’m confronted by Lady Justice, head of the Death Marshal division, and two Ortegas, not just family heads, but among the highest ranking officers of the Monster-Hunter division, chartered with protecting the good people here from various Neverborn threats. No Witch Hunters among you? Do you not see this as providence?” “You forgot me,” Hoffman said sternly. “A mistake I thought you wouldn’t make again.” Ramos, always in control, briefly revealed his agitation at Hoffman’s reference to something the others didn’t know about. He masked his feelings quickly. “No, Mr. Hoffman. I shan’t overlook you. But your charter is a bit more obscure than the others. I’m sure you’ve taken your time looking over all the pertinent data regarding my work. Everything is, no doubt, in order and according to Guild requirements of legality?” “Not why I’m here.” Ramos was more curious than concerned when he said, “Pray; why are you here, then?” “It’s about the symbol you use on your work. The unique work like Hank over there. And,” he paused, not wishing to say it, “Ryle. Not mere prosthetics. That’s just what the Guild used to get me to toe the line.” Speaking so frankly, openly criticizing the Guild, Francisco was shocked and nearly reprimanded him before remembering Hoffman’s authority. Santiago and Ramos were equally impressed. Only Justice remained characteristically stoic. She did say, “And me, Ramos? Did you brand me?” “You, Lady Justice? Like I said, you were dying. Actually, I’d not have been able to help at all if not for the work I previously did on Ryle. Delving so deeply into the flesh has never been my true interest. How’s your breathing, by the way? And the arm?” She said nothing. “Hard to catch your breath? Tingling in the fingers?” He lifted his mechanical arm and the quick gesture nearly had Santiago draw his guns in response. He was itching

for a fight. Ramos held a milky white soulstone between metal finger and thumb, the swirling eddies within invisible even at the distance between them. The stone was pure and valuable, they could tell. He tossed it to Justice. Though blind, she snatched it easily out of the air. It was warm and comfortable in her palm. "A construct cannot be healed," he said, clearly implying that she should use it to heal herself. "Things are not always what they seem. Not so black and white, good or evil." She pocketed the stone but was anxious to use it. If she could wrap the gossamer fabric of the spiritually charged energy within it about her own damaged form and repair her failing internal organs and, she prayed, her arm, it would support Ramos' claim that she was still her natural self, unaugmented by the artificial armature she found so deplorable. Still, she suspected

Ramos of hiding something from her, of withholding an important tool he might use against her sometime in the future. He was correct: the scales teetered erratically and she could not immediately discern the truth. "Our actions tip the scales from side to side, Ramos. Law must be met." Ramos seemed to know exactly how to play her. He said, "Who's law? Natural law or that handed down from a man in power? Am I criminal for saving your brother's life, Hoffman? Or yours, Justice? By using the knowledge and skills I've acquired naturally?" He was wise to accentuate the word. It had a strong effect upon Lady Justice. She said nothing. Her conflict with Resurrectionists and their animated puppets left little room to doubt her purpose and actions. Ramos, however, challenged her absolute vision of right and wrong. As he said, he was a man, using his innate gifts and abilities. If it was true that he did not unnaturally replace her organs, and clearly didn't replace her arm with a mechanical prosthetic, perhaps he spoke truthfully after all. Still, her arm tingled, and she couldn't shake the buzzing in the base of her skull that felt as though it originated deep within her torso. She had to reluctantly acquiesce and take him on his word that he did nothing to her physically to make her less than natural, less than human. Why images of him floated in and out of her memory like a dream, quickly dissipating, perplexed her. Hoffman stepped beside her. He spoke as confidently as Ramos. "Perhaps you are right, Dr. Ramos. Your crimes, though a concern to the Guild, is specifically for the lawyers and judges of the Witch Hunter charter to determine, as you suggest. In pursuit of interests to my charter, I have unearthed a tome with a symbol familiar to you. Unless I can determine its unique design, I'm afraid it has rather serious implications regarding your innocence. If Lady Justice and I might sit with you, in private, you can help convince us how we might proceed." Ramos regarded them for a long moment. His mind worked quickly. He knew there could be only one symbol Hoffman referred to, and he sought, in his memory, for some mistake he might have made – some grafted device he couldn't account for. Finally, he had to reluctantly say, "Yes. Perhaps it is best we spoke in private. No need to detain Ms. Justice, though. I believe she has what she's come for." Justice said, "Actually, it would do me well to sit. Need to catch my breath. Can you extend me that hospitality, Doctor?" He had to reluctantly agree. When they were seated within his makeshift office, warm but still uncomfortable, Hoffman revealed the symbol he had discovered in an ancient and forgotten Neverborn text. Ramos tried to dismiss it as coincidence and even pointed out the symbol's differences with his own design. He confessed that he had possibly seen the symbol in some text he had, himself, collected and inadvertently adopted it as his own mark. None of them were convinced, least of all Ramos, who looked quite perplexed. He gave Hoffman several books from his collection, which he promised might aid in uncovering the truth. All of them would speculate upon the puzzling ramifications of

Ramos' symbol, buried deep within a book written long ago, by a people that had not yet heard of humans.