

December 21 The ground bucked and heaved, rumbling angrily. All throughout the City the inhabitants clutched one another as the quake cracked the foundations of their homes and split the roads. Furniture and decorations were broken. Lives were lost as ceilings and walls fell. Stepping frantically out of their crumbling homes and businesses, the residents of Malifaux did not find any comfort or hope outside. Steam and fire erupted from the numerous cracks splitting the pavement, and lava spewed from the wider crevasses. Lives were lost as some teetered upon the shaking ground to be thrown into a crack that crushed the victim between two walls. The temperature of the ground grew warm, and steam rose from its surface as the frost was quickly burned away. But the wind rolled strong and bitter from out of the north where a dark storm raged, the edges stretching and circling from directly overhead and out beyond the mountains and into the unknown regions to the north. Their bones shook so violently it was difficult to stand, and the tremors sent pain shooting through them, knocking most to the ground. The wind bit into their flesh, slicing into them like daggers. Darkness loomed above, blotting out the pale afternoon sun and bringing darkness upon them. Black fog snaked its way through alleys and narrow streets, up the sloping hills of the City to the more populated region of the Northern Gates. It emanated from the Plague Pit to envelop everyone in its inky opacity so that they struggled against the tumult near blindness. Almost all believed they wouldn't survive more than a few minutes now, and people clutched desperately at anyone near to avoid loneliness at what they believed was the end of all their lives. No voice or cry could be heard above the quaking and moaning of the rocks below and the deafening wind attacking from above. As quickly and violently as it had come upon them, the rumbling ground suddenly calmed, only their bodies continued to shake as they began to recover. The wind silenced, and the gale that pressed against them so violently lost its strength and blew gently against exposed flesh. Still cold, it was so warm in contrast that people gasped, feeling comforted by the calm and gentle breeze upon them. Many were uncertain whether they remained alive or had died and this was their joining lost loved ones in the dark afterlife. But the darkness surrounding them, also dissipated in the span of several quick and frantic breaths. People looked around in shock and confusion as they began to sit up slowly, expecting the reprieve to be temporary, soon returning them to the apocalyptic events that sought to end them. Their wide eyes looked around, and momentarily, light broke through the gray clouds above, bathing them in sudden warmth. The silence was startling. In the distance, some blocks away, they heard the wailing of a child, the pained moans of the wounded dimly joining some seconds later. They had been spared. RRR On the edge of the Quarantine Zone, beside the pit of the plagued victims, Samael Hopkins struggled to wake, to dispel the stupor that sought to drag him comatose. He had lost consciousness but could not be certain of the length of the darkness and stupor. Even now, fighting against it, his head lolled, and his eyes were far too heavy to open. They flickered, and he nearly gave into the weakness that sought to suppress him. But he saw the blurry image of Molly stooping over the gray body of Seamus, the lunatic with the ridiculous top hats. Hopkins had little left, yet his senses came briefly to some clarity, and the image of the girl came slowly into focus. She might have been lovely in life, but her pallor was grotesque and unnatural and revolting as of old meat, too spoiled to consume. It was a strange analogy to make for a person walking amongst them, but he found her both revolting and alluring at once. Her facial features were slack and emotionless as she regarded Seamus. The blackness had dissipated, he realized, and the sun glinted off of a green gem she held between her thumb

and forefinger. She pressed it against the gray flesh of his forehead and pushed hard, though she gave no visible expression of exertion. Hopkins watched, slipping in and out of lucidity. The stupor that enveloped Samael's senses dissipated slowly. Molly pushed her whole weight down upon his forehead. In her hand was the large green gem. She was pressing it into the bullet hole that had ended him. 'What the hell?' Hopkins thought, confusion replacing the last vestiges of fear that lingered at the base of his mind. Strangely, with each pressing upon the gem, he felt a sudden surge of anathema toward Seamus and an unreasonable fear of the damnation that surrounded him. A final urging upon the gem sank the green stone through the skull and into the brain beneath. Like a pebble dropped into a still pool, a ripple on the air passed over Samael Hopkins like the resonance of a gong. Seamus' dead body twitched. Hopkins felt the dissipating fear suddenly return in a deluge, and his fearful gasp caught in his throat. Seamus twitched again, his hand turning over on the cobblestone in the pool of his own blood, blackened by the stain of damnation that consumed him. Abruptly twisting, he sat bolt upright, his eyes wide and confused as he looked about. The flesh of his ghastly wound stretched and pulled to cover the bullet hole, and as it sealed, his dead gray eyes began glowing bright green. They darted about in confusion, making him look briefly normal as anyone in such phenomenal circumstances might feel panic and bewilderment. But then his high arching brows drew angrily down over his unnatural eyes, and his broad maniacal smile returned. "Ah, no," Seamus said, his voice more or less back to normal, but Hopkins thought he detected a strange and subtle echo in the voice. "Molly! Damn ye. What d'ye think ye're doing?" She said nothing. She had no visible emotion whatsoever, if she were even still capable of feeling anything. The dark gray of his skin slowly resumed its more pale and pinkish hue as he pulled the dandy's shirt from his back, now just tattered rags from the gargantuan growth that had shredded it to pieces. Seamus pointed to a severed head beside the two, against other bodies slung onto the pit. He accused, "You put 'er up to this, didn't ye? You!" The head spoke, Samael saw, but he couldn't make out what it said. He was aghast. Seamus continued, saying, "Now I be doubly damned, Tombers. You said you and the Tear could bring me back but ye didn't say ye'd be sticking it in me damned head! Not a lot of room in there for me, the Spirit, and the Gorgon, ye blasted imbecile. I'll be leaving ye here on the pit to think about what ye've done. Both of ye." He returned back to Molly and spat, "And you! I gave ye life! I can take it from ye, too." He stood, sputtering and cursing. He saw Samael, chained to the iron fence. Chained by his own tools, chained and trapped. The Resurrectionist looked quickly around and found the outlandish hat that towered ridiculously above his head. He pushed it down over his head. Still sputtering incoherently, Seamus approached him angrily. Hopkins struggled against the chains, confused by his own desperately fashioned lashings that made little sense. He had bound himself in the throes of the most unreasonable fear. He'd never be able to get free in time. Seamus was right upon him when Hopkins grabbed the Colt from the ground near him. He lifted it and fired. Seamus flinched. The bullet, however, struck the hat, knocking it once more from his head. Seamus jumped and flailed briefly in surprise, looking back at the hat rolling away from him, a large hole through the center of it. "Damn ye are the lousiest shot with that thing I have ever heard of," he yelled angrily. Samael leveled it upon him, sure that he'd take the lunatic's head off with the next shot. He pulled the trigger. It clicked, but did not fire. He gasped. Between the two were the rest of his bullets, there on the ground. Both men saw them. Seamus turned to Molly, standing off behind him. "You emptied the gun, didn't ye?" he called to her. "One in the

chamber, too, Molly, Dear.” He shook his head, cursing her briefly. Hopkins lunged toward the bullets, but they were just beyond his reach. He jerked and tugged at the gate, the chains bruising and lacerating his flesh. Desperately he pulled, nearly breaking his hand. He sought to pull free even if it meant tearing his hand off. Seamus stood above the bullets, then bent to look Hopkins in the face. His eyes glowed green and the skin around them began to turn pale, the ashen pallor

moving in a most disturbing manner as it slowly spread. The odd echo returned to Seamus’s speech as he growled, “She be not that bright,” of Molly. “But she means well. You could ‘ave killed me, boyo. You often miss when ye’re target’s so close?” The gray of his flesh receded once again though his eyes retained the luminescent green. Hopkins recoiled, pulling himself against the gate upon which he was lashed, preparing for the death that was about to be delivered. “No,” he said calmly. “I don’t often miss. This close or otherwise.” “Yet ye did. And I didn’t do much to stop ye. Didn’t even try to get out of the way. I’ve heard too much of ye to believe I could, either.” “Soulstones,” Samael said. “Did ye see any of the vapor? No need to twist the fate here, boyo. It’s strong enough today. We be just poppet to its greater will.” He stood and shook his head. Samael expected his death to come at any moment, but Seamus turned and walked away. He stooped to pick up his hat and dusted it off briefly before popping it down upon his head. He winked at Hopkins and walked away. “That’s it?” Hopkins called, surprised. He was happy enough to live but surprised that Seamus didn’t kill him. Seamus had a reputation for killing everyone that crossed him, and Hopkins was bound and vulnerable. Seamus didn’t stop, however, but said, just loud enough to be heard, “Ye and that daft girl, Criid, didn’t pay attention to anything, did ye? Left all the clues I could, and it’s a wonder ye did anything correct at all.” He shook his head and then disappeared down an alley, heading toward the more populated areas of the City. Molly approached him carrying the head Seamus had yelled at beside the mound of bodies. She said, “The Tyrants cannot be stopped.” “Well,” the disembodied head added, full of lively animation as though it were just as alive as him, “not by us. Well, you and those like you. I’m not much in the position to try to stop much of anything. Not that I was ever very good at that sort of thing even before I lost my body, if you see what I mean.” Molly pulled a dark velvet bag from the belt around her dress. “Now, Molly,” the head said, “Just give me a minute!” She said nothing but hesitated before thrusting the head into the pouch. “Tombers?” Hopkins inquired. “Yes, well, at your service, as it were,” the head of Phillip Tombers said. “The Tyrants cannot be stopped. Not in the way we might understand. Not with the means at our disposal. You see, we don’t--” he was interrupted as Molly thrust him into the bag and pulled the drawstring close, cradling it in the crook of her arm. Molly said, “The vessel must die. Without the vessel, the Tyrant has no means of ascension.” “They’d just find another.” “Yes,” she responded emotionlessly. “But if they invest their energy in consuming the host at the time of the death, their power will be greatly dissipated. It would be years, possibly centuries before they might be a threat again. This world was ravaged by them before they could be stilled. Now they rise again. Only a few of the more ambitious have made their presence known, hurrying before the others might awaken. But they stir as well.” She stood and walked away. She hesitated and said over her shoulder, “Criid is near. She’s beneath the city in long tunnels carved by the ancient people.” “Is she alive?” he asked. Molly didn’t respond. “How can I find her?” he called. “The Necropolis,” Molly said. “The Necropolis? She’s at the Necropolis?” Molly cocked her head, regarding him there upon the ground like a dog seeing something strange and puzzling.

She said no more, and the heels of her boots, clearly bound and shod by a master cobbler, clacked on the pavingstones. They were dirty. Her dress, too, once very expensive and imported from Europe for the look of its ornate lacework, bore an unfortunate layer of stains at their length from dragging through city muck and all the strange places Seamus had taken her. His boots were filthy. Torn and frayed, too. He and Molly were different than most. They loyally followed a master without question, their loyalty unwavering. He was bound to Criid until death, but often wondered if her cause was true.

He got to work unraveling the chains that bound him. He needed to get below ground, through the twisting and impossible maze of the sewers. He needed to find the Necropolis. Rumor and archaic references in their studies declare it to be somehow more vast than Malifaux – itself a greater city than any standing Earthside. Yet none had found it. That is, if any would-be explorer had discovered it in the depths below, they had not survived to report their findings. Near the peak of Cold Heart, as the cultists had come to name the mountain they laid claim to, the remaining Silent Ones, priests, and acolytes stood, not quite confident enough to approach the remains of Rasputina, freezing on the ice and snow. The air bore a chill but no longer bit through them with such vehemence. The creamy light from the sun washed across them in broken pools through the dissipating clouds. The girl, Snow, turned from Rasputina's broken form, unmoving before her. She looked down upon the Wendigo Storm, slain by her own hand. Like Rasputina and December, her bond with the beast was great. His death left her with a tangible void. The weather had bent to her will through him. The wind and cold and snow had been hers to manipulate, though only briefly and in a limited range. Now it was gone. Part of her died with Storm, she realized. Her soul and his were entwined. Rasputina had said it was like a soulstone constantly flooding her with the rapture of another spirit enveloping her own in a strange and comforting embrace. Now that it was gone, Snow could feel nothing at all. She sat upon a rock near the still beast. She wanted to feel remorse if not anguish, anger if not rage. She felt only apathetic and merely stared at it. Long minutes passed that way in silence. None of them dared move, and none wanted to be the first to approach Rasputina. They were not afraid, exactly. It was more a question of propriety. They looked to Snow as the natural successor of the order, but she could not speak to direct them and showed no inclination to try. The thickly muscular shoulders of Storm twitched. Snow's eyes grew wide. It had been prone, unmoving for long moments. It gave a deep inhale of breath, gurgling around the gaping cut in its throat. It shook as if wrestling something off of its back, rolled over, and stood uncertainly. The long laceration at its throat, cut through to its spine, came slowly together. Muscle and flesh bound together before their disbelieving eyes. Seconds later, its flesh looked undamaged, and it fought off the last of the stupor. Storm bent and howled in rage. There was nothing for him to release his anger upon, so he continued to roar, the sound reverberating far across the valleys separating the mountains. The others heard only his rage breaking the uncomfortable silence since Rasputina's fall. Snow, however, heard an echo, faint and not from the sides of the mountain, but a subdued whisper beneath Storm's deafening roar. She heard December and He spoke to her. I will not be undone, she heard Him say. Invested too much. But His voice was weak. So faint she could scarcely be sure she heard it and not simply imagine it. Tell her. He said in that ghostly whisper, I will come for her again. Storm's howl ceased, and Snow looked upon Rasputina. She jumped, aghast and in reverent awe. The Silent Ones and acolytes, too, started. Rasputina sat upright, eyes blinking slowly, weakly, her

chest unmarked and whole again and rising and falling with weak breaths. "You will not have me," she said weakly. "You will never have me." December had been thwarted. He had poured so much of His accumulated might into turning Rasputina into His vessel that her death might forever have diminished Him, might have ended the threat of Him forever. 'You couldn't let me die,' she thought, knowing the last bit of His presence was still there. She was weak. He was weaker. 'I am stronger than you. I always will be.' 'I will have you. Soon.' 'Never. I am willing to do what you cannot. I will die before you will have me.' He had devoted so much of His will into manifesting His physical incarnation at Kythera, only to be thwarted by the magical Masamune. He had diminished months ago when she had shunted him aside, forming Snow and Storm, weaker facsimiles of their hateful symbiotic relationship. It weakened Him again. Losing her at the last moment of his consumption would have been his undoing. She knew He was still there, in her mind,

connected to her. But He was weak. He spitefully put her back together with the last vestiges of His aetheric presence. He could not impose a change upon her personality or motivations. However, He could change her physical needs, and for this, she would forever live with a feverish hunger that would never be fully sated. RRR Samael Hopkins worked his way north as best he could in the subterranean labyrinth of the sewers beneath Malifaux. Typically calm and acutely aware of the most minute detail of his surroundings, he moved frantically, hardly thinking of the details of each stretch of tunnel. He retained his innate sense of direction even as the tunnels twisted upon themselves and ran at length to a dead-end in wide drainage pools, forcing him to backtrack cautiously. Still, the tunnels, themselves, seemed to actually lead him northward. The less he concentrated on direction and finding the best path, the easier he found it to move forward. Tunnels he thought were wider, or merely seemed a better choice instinctively, led him too far out of his way or even led back upon a former tunnel in his trek. Giving himself over to Fate, running haphazardly down one narrow tunnel after another, he quickly came to believe the players involved in Malifaux's intricacies were all such pawns to far greater forces beyond them. He gave in to odd impulses to take darker passages that branched away from his supposed destination but that turned around a bend to return northward with more open and easy walkways beside the slowly moving morass of the sewage waste. Tunnels he would swear should better lead him to the north side of the city would have fallen stones and collapsed walls from the violent tremors that had struck the area. When he came to a narrow channel filled not with sewage but dark lava, crusting over as it cooled, just a dim glow in small cracks across its surface, Samael knew he was close. Seeing the channel of lava not burning hot and moving quickly along the same path caused an uneasy sense of dread that mounted with each continued step. Cherufe, the Fire Tyrant, and Sonnia Criid had no doubt met, and Samael wondered who had succeeded in their goal. With no further thought or hesitation, he followed the lava flow at a dead run. It was under these conditions that he very accidentally came upon the edge of the Necropolis. Sonnia had referenced it several times as an important location used by the ancient Neverborn for something essential in their past, though further references of the acts conducted there or its deeper purpose were never articulated within any uncovered text. Moreover, every Guild expedition sent specifically to find the location never met with success. If the explorers resurfaced at all, they were merely covered in grime, exhausted, and deeply afraid they would never have made it out. Those few didn't report sightings of any creature or obstacle of overt danger that inspired their fear. It was the maze that caused the dread. Reports of doubling

back, walking the same path over and over again or of simply turning around and retreating without seeming to even realize it was a commonly repeated statement from all of the returnees. The majority of expert trackers and spelunkers sent down to survey the labyrinth and find the fabled Necropolis were never seen again. Samael, himself, had vowed to lead an expedition to find it, sure he could discover it where none other had been successful. But Sonnia's quest had deferred those plans. Now, without trying, he skirted along the very side of this mysterious region that had eluded trackers specifically seeking it out. He refused to give in to the unnatural fear emanating from the corridors and alcoves housing stacked sepulchers and ornately carved images that were both beautiful and terrible. As he ran past longer corridors, deeper into the heart of the Necropolis, their depths swallowed all light. Despite his fear, he felt the lure of the secrets around him, wanting to explore this place. Like the fear, he knew the fascination was artificial, planted in his mind by this accursed place, to keep him trapped in its darkness. More than once he imagined he saw the glint of light from the passage reflected from a set of eyes. Turning to focus upon them, however, revealed nothing save the absolute pitch blackness encompassing the cold passages. Finally, the gray surface of the lava stream opened upon a vast chamber. Around the perimeter of the great chamber were other passages that ran in every direction, each of them pouring into this cavity a similar stream of lava that was cooling quickly with a dark gray crust and dim glow from below the surface. They all met at this central pool of lava, itself suffering the same hardening due to the dissipating heat.

His heart fell, but he was not surprised to see Sonnia at the center of the pool. She was kneeling. The lava had cooled, dark and hard around her legs and forearms below the surface. Her own sword had impaled her chest, protruding far from her back. He sighed, wishing he could have been there to protect her. He would have failed, too. She had to die. That's what Seamus had said and Samael now believed him. Sonnia did what she had to do to stop Cherufe. It's why the lava had ceased its burning. Why the quaking had ceased as well. He stepped gingerly upon the pool, finding the surface strong enough to support him, and walked to her. She was so driven, so focused. Of course she would stop at nothing to end the possible reign of the most dangerous of the Tyrants – even before it could get a foothold in Malifaux once again. He wondered how she had managed it, looking down upon the scene of her body destroyed both by lava and her own sword. It would have been a sight to behold, he knew that. He also knew that he could not bury her. Not in the way she deserved. He loathed leaving her so ceremoniously out in the open, too. He'd bury her with stones broken from the low wall encircling the pool. Her sword would be left upon the mound to mark her burial. He gripped it for the first time. Even buried within her flesh, held in place through severed bone and sinew, he felt its heft and wondered how she could have wielded it so effortlessly. It was much larger, even, than Lady Justice's. He held it tightly and pulled it from her body. As the end of the blade was about to leave her body, it caught for a second as if in protest. He pulled it free with a jerk. Sonnia's eyes opened wide as the blade left her body, and she inhaled sharply. A trail of wispy flame followed the sword. She coughed and said, "Sam!" in a voice dry and broken. "Get back!" The thin fire licking at the end of the great sword flickered and was gone. As it dissipated, the hardened gray lava rock engulfing Sonnia burst into bright orange liquid magma, flowing away from her, spreading quickly out to engulf the rock all around, turning it back into the burning lava. It spread from her in a ring toward the edge of the round pool. Samael wasted no time in pondering how she

was reawakened from death. He ran. Faster than he had run before, barely letting his boot soles hit the hardened rock as he ran to the low wall, hot lava popping and gurgling just behind him, sizzling upon his pant legs and boots. He dove over the wall just as the lava overtook him, dissolving the rock beneath him, and hit the ground hard, rolling in the accumulated dust. He turned over to see Sonnia lean back, her head facing toward the cavern's ceiling far above, the lava splashing around her. She moaned, barely audible above the roiling pool of glowing magma and suddenly erupted in flame. Her body launched above the pool, the thick liquid dripping from her. Hovering for a moment, head far back and arms outstretched, she clearly suffered no damage from the flames. The wound in her chest glowed as if her blood had turned to the same molten rock that flowed beneath her. Her head snapped forward, and she looked at him angrily. Her eyes, too, glowed bright yellow, blinding him as he looked upon her. When she spoke, her voice was gravelly, like metal on stones. "You damned fool! You shouldn't have come. You should have just left me dead," she said. The fire trailing behind her snaked down and bent about the pool. He imagined it even twisted back up and formed the head of a large reptilian beast glaring at him hatefully. But the fire shifted and twisted, and the heat was intense, and everything shimmered and vibrated in his vision as it overwhelmed him. A gout of fire belched forth from her mouth, consuming everything below her. She flew forward on the fire, breathing it down upon everything in her path which, unfortunately, led directly toward him. He could not run, and there was no shelter to protect him. She was too fast, and the cone of fire too broad. He covered his face with one forearm while the other held the sword he had pulled from her body. When the fire washed down upon him, the sword glimmered and sang a high, sharp note as it glowed blue. The fire bathed him in heat, but he was not burned. Even his clothing was spared from the flames. As she passed above him, the sword's chime dissipated along with the glow down its center. She seemed not to mind that he survived the assault, flying quickly down a larger tunnel toward the southeast of the city, toward the feared Necropolis. The trail of fire behind her formed the head of a draconic beast, he was sure, that snapped at him as it trailed her. The sword struck another high chord as the flaming bite engulfed him, and he heard it growl as it disappeared, glowing brightly down the corridor and

around twists and turns in the labyrinth until it was gone. The pool and the channels of lava quickly cooled to dark gray as she left. Cherufe had won, then, he knew. It had devoured Sonnia, even after she had sacrificed herself to stop it. He, Samael Hopkins, was solely responsible for defying that sacrifice, by making her death moot. He cursed. Now the Tyrant was loosed upon the world to consume far more than the woman chosen as its vessel. And when it was done with this world, it would move on to the next. Possibly through the Breach into the Old World. Samael held Sonnia's sword, heavy and cold. It kept him from a fiery death, and he understood now that its arcane purpose was greater than he could have guessed. He would most certainly keep it close. He did not like the idea of confronting her, but he had an obligation to stop the Tyrant. He particularly did not enjoy the thought of entering the Necropolis. Steeling his resolve, he set out to find her.