

December 2 Joss looked up the side of the mountain, now fully vertical as he neared the last stage of his ascension. He was buried to his waist in heavy snow, just loose enough that it could not support his great bulk. If there was a trail still beneath his feet, he could surely no longer tell. He loosened the heavy leather anorak enough to reach behind him and dialed up the energy level of the dynamic generator mounted to his back, fumbling for a minute to feel the correct knob beneath the heavy mitten he refused to remove. A blast of wind bit into him, drawing the remainder of the heat from his chest at once, and he cursed, quickly refastening the buttons to tighten the coat again, to rebuild whatever heat the generator might create. He was afraid it would catch the heavy coat on fire, but he had the same fear the previous three times he had overpowered it. As he had vowed each of those times, he was sure this had to be the very last time he throttled up the power. It brought little additional warmth, anyway. Maybe if he caught on fire it might actually help, he wondered, pondering if flame could freeze. His mountain guide had convinced him to take this longer trek that wound further back and forth across the mountain's face because it was much easier to traverse. For the first leg of their expedition, three days earlier, he may have been right as the group walked virtually unimpeded across rocky but manageable trails. They had camped without incident upon a flat landing where even the two pack mules showed no discomfort, and the extra men he had brought to test their mettle remained in good spirit, dismissing the rumors of the mountain's sinister brutality from the comfort of the campfire while they downed bitter but hot coffee. They remained in good spirit despite the cold rolling down upon them, and the coffee gave way to long draws on icy flasks of whisky, which they were sure still warmed their bones. They had slept restfully beneath thick flannel, convinced that those rumors of the mountain were exaggerated tales told by others to sound tough in the taverns of Malifaux. Or, as they now laughed, were told by men weaker than them, which made Joss' men sound tough and brave, too. He, alone, remained silent and aloof, knowing better than the others that their expedition would not remain as uneventful. It was the next day, while hiking and continuing the joke at the expense of those previous mountaineers, clearly weaker than them, that they pressed into a tangible wall of cold that chilled them instantly, freezing their flesh and spirits. Their guide, a grizzled and robust man himself, caused the sense of panic to mount as he stepped through the physical barrier, grew wide-eyed and quickly stepped backward, out of the cold, hesitating. He pressed his hand against it, moving it through the wall. "Dropped twenty-five, thirty degrees," he muttered. "Tain't nat'ral," he said, his voice a coarse whisper against the wind that cut through their anoraks like knives. It was the first time Joss had dialed up the dynamic generator beneath his coat. He had looked down upon the men hesitating on the path, the wind carrying thin flakes of snow before them as an ominous portent of what was to come. Joss adjusted his goggles, tightening them against his face, and turned silently from the men and pressed on. They looked from one to the other, each unsure of what to do, but no man intended to disappoint the bulky northwestern tribesman steadfastly striding above them. The cold and wind had sapped their will, leaving the lighthearted joviality of the previous night a vague and mocking memory. They silently followed one after the other, eyes downcast upon the tread of Joss' boots imprinted in the thickening snow. The last thing they had said to one another was a brief discussion about "The Cold Heart of the Mountains," which became the name of that particular mountain for many years to come, although no one was ever sure any one member of that expedition survived this trek. Still, rumor of the Cold Heart spread to every man, woman, and child in Malifaux. The lead man, ominously named "Mister Graves", stopped abruptly, and they followed his gaze up the trail to see Joss

momentarily double over, bracing against another blast of wind. They could see it strike him, cold and gray. It was the second time Joss throttled up the

dynamic generator, although his hand was a sickly pale blue as he withdrew it from his coat, struggling to put the thick lined mitten back upon it. Graves, too, determined to prove his worth, steeled himself against the raging elements and strode forward. His choked scream reached Joss who turned to see him topple, frozen like a man carved from stone. The others withdrew, but a mule and one more Mountaineer perished before they could retreat to slightly more favorable conditions. Only the hired guide could continue with Joss and that because of the extra coat he managed to pull from Graves. The last words he said to Joss was, "They'll never make it back!" above the gale. They had forged on in silence, struggling through drifts and slipping on ice that was all but invisible beneath a layer of snow, fighting the wind that seemed to blow directly upon them. By mid-day, Joss had to admit that he could no longer tell if they were still on the trail that had gradually narrowed as they ascended, and he labored over more frequent and larger stones that blocked the way. He returned to the guide for reassurance, but he was not there. Joss could not be sure when he lost the man, or whether he had fled in judicious retreat, fallen from the edge of their path, or merely froze to his death. Joss couldn't have heard him above the ferocious howling of the wind, even if the guide had screamed for help directly beside him. Joss had continued, of course, climbing despite the lack of sensation in his hands and feet; most of his body, in fact. Now, however, Joss had come to a true impasse. He no longer doubted that he had been forced off the trail, and he traversed the mountainside as best he could, but the way before him was blocked by several great rocks, each consumed by jagged vertical pillars of ice. Looking up, he knew his destination was only perhaps a hundred feet above him. It was not the apex of the mountain, for the peak was vaguely visible through the blinding blizzard beyond the ledge he sought. But above the mountain he could see the thick roiling black clouds swirling in a great circle for many miles, like a hurricane held in place. The eye of that raging storm was a gaping hole of absolute blackness, clearly visible even through the snow. That black spot loomed directly above the ledge, not the mountain peak, and arms of lightning occasionally flashed from the dark center of the circling cloud to strike that flat ledge of his destination. He could not hear its thunder above the wind but could feel it vibrate through him less than a second after the brilliant flash of light illuminated the rocks and ice around him. Joss was a man that rarely felt fear, but not for the first time on the arduous climb did he reluctantly admit to himself that he truly doubted he would ever leave it alive. He shook out his hands, ineffectually trying to get some feeling back into them. He pulled the twin axes from his back, the static electricity snapping about the intricately engraved blades as the energy from the dynamic generator powered them through the thick cables that extended beneath his anorak to the ends of the metal shafts. He doubted his ability to climb the absolute vertical surface but knew he could not continue winding his way back and forth looking for whatever might be left of a trail, even if he did cut through the rocks and pillars of ice before him. He had little strength remaining, but the electrically charged heads sheared through the rock with fortunate ease. He pulled himself up and sank the second axe into the rock, and he climbed, painfully and with each muscle stinging in protest. He pulled himself up, the axes like claws, dragging himself along the mountainside. He thought he could go no further and looked down to realize he hadn't even traversed half the distance to the ledge above. Dropping would kill him. He pressed on, and the wind impossibly intensified as he drew to the final stretch of the wall,

driving against him like a steam engine. He could barely hold on, let alone complete the climb. Somehow, the great barrier of wind gave for a moment, releasing him, and he propelled himself upward, grasped the edge, and pulled himself from the rocky face, his axes dangling behind him by their power cords. The wind and snow raged on, just beyond the edge, battering the axes against the cliff but barely blew against him as he rolled to his back, face toward the ominous black eye directly above. He blinked twice, and when he closed his eyes against a bolt of lightning that lit the sky above him, he succumbed to the exhaustion and passed out. He had no way of knowing how long he might have been unconscious because the sun was blocked by those swirling clouds.

A pair of hands was upon him, pulling him upright, pouring a warm fluid into his mouth. His vision was blurred, and he could not taste it, only vaguely felt the hot liquid dribble down his chin. The image of a young man's face was before him, blurry and pulling away as he slipped back into unconsciousness. "Rasputina," Joss said. "Must get to Rasputina." The boy's eyes grew wide, and he looked quickly from the left to his right. "Shh!" he commanded. In a hoarse whisper he said, "Do not speak!" Joss was out again. He awoke next as if from a Sunday afternoon nap in the warm orange glow of a fire burning low in the alcove beyond the foot of his bed. The narrow apartment was sparse but warm, and his covers were drawn merely to his waist, leaving his bare torso exposed but comfortable. He was propped to his side because of the generator mounted to his back. He could feel none of the familiar tingling of added power injected into his nervous system, however, and knew at once that it had been powered down completely. After a quick check he confirmed that the acolytes had even tried to remove it. Fools were lucky it didn't kill him. Or that they didn't accidentally discharge it and kill themselves. His axes, however, were disconnected, and their removal caused him to sit upright in a panic. They leaned against the wall, neither damaged nor tampered with. He had never been there but knew he was in the heart of the mountain within one of many rooms built to accommodate those who strangely worshipped the ancient December as a god. The acolytes practiced their own esoteric magics and had fallen against the judgment of the Guild, their abilities something lost between the elemental and the more macabre views the Resurrectionists held regarding life. Ramos had befriended them quickly, of course, finding an ally in the acolytes who shared his Arcanist principles regarding the freedom to explore their own powers and abilities. The storm he had traversed could not have been the priestess, Rasputina's, doing, nor could it have been natural. Rumors of December's death at Kythera, then, were another exaggeration, as Ramos had suspected. The colossal cloud above the temple and the powerful cold and wind he had gone through demonstrated the power of the Tyrant, still gathering. Joss had all the information he wanted and would happily descend to deliver his findings to Ramos as he had been charged. He needed supplies and a quick conversation with Rasputina to deliver the boss's message, and he would depart from the quiet subterranean temple of December's acolytes. Fully dressed and his axes reconnected and held to the dynamic generator magnetically, he set out to find her, not at all predicting that his ordeal on Cold Heart was about to become remarkably more difficult. Exiting into the dimly lit corridors beyond his room, he was met by a small man in layered icy-blue robes whose upper face was enshrouded by the cowl that fell over his eyes. He approached from the hall extending to the right. No natural light could reach them, but lanterns hung at intervals along the walls casting a red glow upon plastered walls that made the hall and chamber temporarily dispel the reality they were in caverns carved into a mountain. As the

acolyte neared him, Joss said, "I need to see Rasputina." The acolyte's eyes grew wide beneath his hood, reflecting strangely crimson in the light. Joss realized the light was unnatural, a luminous rock placed within the lantern's chamber. "It is urgent," he said, and the acolyte jumped toward him with palms pressing forward unthreateningly. "Shh!" he motioned emphatically. "You mustn't speak! Not so loud!" His eyes darted back and forth conspiratorially. "What's this about?" Joss asked as quietly as he could. He was a man that could not easily lower his voice. The acolyte winced. "Come," was all he said, and this no louder than a breath as if compensating for Joss's volume. "I'll need supplies, too," he said and the acolyte seemed to duck his head as he led the way before him. The shadow of someone approaching from an adjoining corridor stretched into the hall before them, and the acolyte first froze, motionlessly intent upon the shadow

of the person approaching. Presently, he jumped to the wall, his back pressed tight to it. He motioned for Joss to do the same. Instead, he stood firm and reached for the handles of the axes upon his back. The acolyte grabbed his arm to stop him, which would normally have elicited a somewhat unrestrained reaction. Something in the fearful urgency of the man's youthful face stayed his hand. Reluctantly, he, too, backed against the wall just as the figure emerged from the hall into his view. Although dressed in ceremonial robes similar to the acolyte, it could not hide the more curvaceous figure of a woman who merely regarded the two men motionlessly. The acolyte stared at the opposite wall, remaining as motionless as possible. She might have been beautiful, Joss thought, regarding the even grace of her movement as she turned and walked toward them. But her red hair was unkempt and oily, and her flesh bore small scars from her neck and up her cheek near her ears. As she drew closer, he realized they were bite marks made in the familiar row of what must be human teeth. Her eyes conveyed her loathing of both men. She intended to pass, but Joss realized he was simply too broad to allow even her petite frame to easily get by in the narrow corridor. He pressed against the wall as tightly as he could, but the dynamic generator on his back prevented it. She looked up at him, clearly with disdain and impatience. He pushed her shoulder so that he might help her squeeze past, but his hand upon her elicited a startling reaction. Her nails, sharp as claws, slashed his forearm, and her cracked lips pulled away from her teeth, and she hissed. Though seething, enraged that he might put a hand upon her, she managed to move past him. Even in the darkness he had seen the emptiness of her mouth. She was still within earshot when he asked, "What happened to her tongue?" The acolyte's expression was one mixed of fear and anger at this stranger's insolence. Joss was not hired for his intellect, but he was shrewd and quick-witted. He quickly suspected something foul had befallen the women inadvertently brought into the Cult of December's ranks. "Ignore it," the acolyte said and motioned for Joss to follow him. Something about the passion that burned within the girl, so full of pain and anger, enraged Joss, though he rarely felt emotionally attached to anyone's problems, much less a stranger's. As they traversed the narrow corridors and up through the levels of the temple, he saw more and more women turning from his sight, hiding their own faces in the shadows, or quickly turning down another corridor. When any one of them could look him in the face, it was with unbridled hatred and defiance. All of them looked upon the young acolyte with seething hatred although, as they did with Joss, most simply averted their gaze and slinked away. He saw more acolytes as they walked, all of them young, some of them whispering quietly to themselves in a faint whisper that never traveled beyond their own ears as they bent close to one another. If

a female ever neared them, especially one standing tall, looking still strong and angry, they snapped silent and often stood rigid against the walls to allow her to pass, looking more terrified than any of the other females slinking silently in the dark corners of the complex. At one such encounter, Joss had seen enough and pulled his acolyte aside. He thought he had understood the fear and anger of the girls – that they had endured something horrible here upon the side of the mountain. But the men's attitude of fear and their own compulsion for silence made little sense to him. Without even trying to lower his voice Joss said, "What happened here? Tell me." "Be silent!" the young man said in a hoarse whisper. Joss was not silent. He did not raise his voice but it still resounded from the rock walls for all to hear. "What did you do to the girls?" Acolytes and Silent Ones stopped and turned toward them. "Where are the priests?" "You fool!" the acolyte accused. He backed away from Joss, advancing confidently and angrily toward him. "It has nothing to do with us! It's December. The prophecy." "I've heard the prophecy," he said. "Silent Ones," he said nodding to a girl partially obscured by the deep shadows of protruding arches along the wall. "December needs a voice. He must find the frozen heart, and through her He must incant the invocation." It was gibberish to Joss. "A voice!" the acolyte said. "She must have a voice. The girls must not speak. Or December could consume all. The frozen heart and a voice for Him to speak. We're trying to save the world."

Something in the acolyte's demeanor told Joss that he didn't fully believe it himself. That the story was only partially true or that there was more left unsaid. A female peered around the corner of another corridor meeting theirs, clearly meek; she cowered when his gaze fell upon her. She trembled when she looked back at him to see he still looked at her, and he knew the signs of a person frozen in fear. He had seen it in many of his enemies. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the first girl he had seen in the corridors below, now clearly following them, and she turned to regard him, full of contempt but confused at his own hostility toward the boy. Joss stepped close to the boy and actually tried to whisper. It still carried over the stillness. "And the bite marks? The submission? The anger? What caused that? Those were part of a plan to thwart December?" It was an accusation. Joss didn't understand the fervent following of this Tyrant Entity by other humans, but he understood how men in power could use their power for all of the wrong reasons. Using strength against the weak was something he had seen plenty of. A hand fell upon the thickly flexing muscles of his forearm. He turned to see the girl he had first witnessed when he had left his room. Hostile and loathsome to touch him, she pulled her hand from his arm with a look of disgust at having to place her fingers upon his skin. The look of contempt she shot at the acolyte was worse. Looking back to Joss, she pointed at the young man and shook her head. She pointed up, through the ceiling of the corridor and motioned something, clenching her fists before her and pantomiming rage with her teeth. "Not the boy," he understood, and nodded. The acolyte said, "The priests." He looked away, ashamed and afraid once again. "She means the priests are to blame. Not us, the acolytes." The boy slid along the wall, away, looking considerably more afraid of the Silent One than of Joss, which perplexed him. She pointed up, through the ceiling, again. Joss turned to the acolyte. "Take me up," he commanded, though his voice was even. "Take me up." He was sure it would get him out of the temple's living quarters at the least, and would likely provide a means for his exit as well. Following the unspoken command of the Silent One, he suspected he'd get the answers to his question as well. They didn't speak as they traversed the narrow corridors.

December's temple. Joss saw other young men, acolytes, as well as the girls, each averting their eyes from him, but all as full of hostility or fear as the next. One girl even stared hatefully at the boy, causing him to go rigid and silent, before noticing Joss. Once she did, her facial features relaxed, and she quickly walked on, and the boy resumed his quiet stride as well. Many of the women were more afraid than angry, cowering and trembling at the sight of him. What he did not see were the older, more mature men that he was accustomed to seeing in all the dealings Ramos had in the past. They were the supposed leaders of the faith, and they were noticeably absent. Joss said, "She blamed the priests. Where are they?" The boy would not speak even after Joss repeated the question more menacingly. When he said, "Maybe I should speak to these priests, myself," the boy bowed his head once more. He said in a sad whisper, "I don't think it will be necessary." Joss was led through a series of elevations and chambers of the temple. He saw elaborate and beautiful decorations and architectural brilliance in vast cavernous chambers, illuminated with many thousands of the luminescent crystals that reflected all light like mirrors, to fill each room with a rainbow of colors. Other rooms, whether spacious or small, were ascetic, void of ornamentation or comfort, and often with just enough light to make out the area. Presently, the steps and walls became rough, and more natural. They came to the top of the stairs and the boy halted at the twin doors of heavy timber. "I'll go no further," he said to Joss. "She's out there." The boy trembled, and his lower lip quivered. "Rasputina?" At the word, his eyes grew wide, and he could no longer stand there at the landing before the great doors. He stepped down, first slowly, uncertain, and then nearly ran. Joss opened the great doors, striding confidently into the wide and rough-hewn cave that opened to the side of the mountain at the far end, glaring brightly though he knew it was dark beneath the storm that raged. He strode to Rasputina, angry enough at whatever tragedy had befallen the women here at the hands of the elders that he would help right those wrongs. But the

nostrils, and he heard her harsh and angry words, conveying her conflict, before he could see her. Pillars of ice rose from the floor, and frozen stalactites dropped from the ceiling, making him feel as if he walked into the mouth of December, Himself. Stepping around those icy teeth, he was shocked by what he saw. Rasputina, unconcerned by the cold, wore only a skirt, cut on one leg nearly to her hip, leaving her legs bare above leather boots. She had no coat, and her arms were bare, pale but covered in blood from her hands to elbows. Those icy teeth, he realized, were exactly that; before her was a man, one of the cult's elder priests that Joss had expected to find in the temple. But he was held off the ground by one of those jagged ice spikes, pierced from beneath, and another from above that cut down through his shoulder, thick blood seeping from the laceration and flowing across his body and pooling beneath him. The priest's eyes were rolling up into his head, and Joss knew he was on the edge of death. He had seen this fight many times, as a man's will dies moments before his body follows. He knew this man would soon expire as his head lolled against the ice that held him aloft. Standing there, between those icy teeth, he realized that other men, now merely corpses, were frozen within them, sometimes above, sometimes near the ground. He recoiled, more in surprise than at the visceral state of the remains; each had large areas of flesh and muscle torn away as if devoured by a creature before they could be fully frozen within the ice. He gasped, looking at all of the corpses frozen into each icy fang around him. She turned, and he recoiled again, for dark blood covered her lower face and dripped down the front of her tight bodice and upon the skin of her shoulders and upper

chest. "Rasputina?" He was at a loss, and that was not a common occurrence for a man known for his ability to predict any horrible event and react to it evenly and quickly. "Ah, Ramos' right-hand man. What do they call you, again?" "Joss." Her eyes were wild. She smiled, and the macabre around her mouth made the gesture horrible and sinister. He had no coat, no supplies, but he looked to the mouth of the cave, gathering his wits and formulating a plan of escape should this encounter go badly. So far, he began to understand, there was no good way the day was going to end. "Yes, Joss. Good of you to visit. Where's your boss? Frozen on the path up?" He said nothing. "No. Of course not. Cozy down in his apartments in the city. Comfortable, isn't he? No one aware of what he's up to as he plots and schemes and devours the Guild right there within them." "Rasputina," Joss began, slowly and more gently than he had spoken to another person in many years. "What are you doing here?" The robes of the priest before her had been torn away from the wound caused by the jutting spike from above, and a large patch of his flesh along his ribs was gone, removed to the bone. Killing the priests might have been justified for the full extent of their crimes, but she had crossed a line even he couldn't understand. "Doing here?" she asked, and her eyes gleamed. She almost laughed, but her expression was mocking. "I'm in education now, Joss. A school marm. Teaching wayward children." "You're killing them. The priests." "Oh, I don't see it that way." He wanted to say something, but could not. "They want to know power, Joss. They really want to know power. They need to know what it's like to have power. Something you already know, don't you?" Still he said nothing. "What brings you up here, Joss? Want to join the religion?" She sneered, clearly angry at the notion of a religion devoted to the worship of one she despised. "The initiation doesn't take that long." She tried to smile but it, too, was false. He was cold and stoic, having very little normal emotion, himself. Rasputina, however, was something different. Almost devoid of any human emotion, he realized. It made her considerably more dangerous than last he had seen her. She had killed now and had gone far beyond the first kills that left a normal person full of confusion, doubt, and guilt. She could kill without hesitation, without mercy, now. He thought he might change the subject, to speak to her normally so that it might ground her in something real. "Ramos suspected the rumors of December's death at Kythera were false. The miners that were lost are of no consequence."

"Miners? Is this about miners?" She grew angry. "While he's down there, living out his life in comfort, designing an intricate plan for his future, I'm up here--" She cut herself off. At least she had some emotion left. Unfortunately, it seemed that anger was the only thing she could still feel. She regained her composure, burying the anger beneath that inner sheath of ice. "No," Joss said. Of course Ramos had sent him here to partially chastise her for killing those men, tools of his organization. However, Joss knew he'd need to change tactics with her now, fully aware that something strange had befallen Rasputina. "Not about any miners. Ramos doesn't care about the miners. Only you. He wants you to come down to the city. He can protect you." "Protect? Me?" Her eyes were piercing daggers. "Me?" she spat. "Ramos doesn't know nearly as much as he thinks he does. He is another child stumbling about, thinking the world revolves around him." Something in what she said seemed to strike a memory that caused her to pause, looking less angry, more regretful as she looked past him, almost longingly. "He'll do what he can to help you," Joss said. "And the women here." "Put us in one of his shows?" she asked absently. "Pretty showgirls to be fawned over?" Her voice was quiet. Joss suspected that once Rasputina likely longed to be normal.

Perhaps even a dancer as she now suggested in sarcastic jest. Her eyes suddenly fastened upon him, and her thin brows drew down in renewed anger. Her lips, too, drew back in a sneer, the blood around her mouth gleaming in the light from the mouth of the cave. "I have a message for you to deliver to your boss," she said. "You let him know that I'm tired of dealing with his messenger. I want to talk to him. You tell him to come up for a visit. You know what? Let's send him a message he'll really understand, so that there's no doubt about my sentiment." Her arm whipped from her side in a flashing arc and a wind emanated from her with such violent force that he was knocked from his feet and thrown against the far wall with enough force to stun him. Before he could fall to the floor, her other arm had snapped from above to her side, and ice shot up from the floor of the cave and from his back, holding him in place, frozen to the wall. It had him by the torso, from around his neck all the way down to his thighs, leaving his limbs struggling futilely. She walked toward him casually while he struggled against the ice, pressing against it and striking it with his fists, all to no avail. "Ah, Joss. Ramos' right-hand man. You'd do anything for him, wouldn't you? It's not the money, I bet. It's being so close to all that power. Control. Isn't that right?" He continued to struggle. She reached out to grab him around the wrist of his right arm. It was so frigid that he lost all sensation in the arm, and it went limp and numb. She pulled it out straight and placed his hand to the wall, freezing it in place, the arm extended. "Rasputina," he pleaded. "We want to help! We want to help you!" She left him hanging there for a moment, standing before him emotionlessly. His arm was numb, but he looked on in horror as it turned blue, freezing from within as the biting chill of her touch solidified his blood and tissues. Gathering his wits, he renewed his struggle to free himself from the ice but knew it was in vain. Of all the ways he had imagined he would die, always at the hands of another, this was far from anything he could have predicted. Never would he have imagined he might die without a fight, helpless while his adversary took her time. Minutes passed, though it stretched longer in his mind as she stood before him, concentrating on the cold that devoured his arm. Joss had to focus for his mind had begun to retreat from the reality of his impending death. She was interrupted by the mute groaning of a girl beside her. Rasputina's eyes fluttered open, glowing pale blue before returning to normal. The girl wore tight black leather, strapped around her legs by narrow buckles. Like Rasputina, she wore only a small bodice to cover her upper body, leaving her shoulders and arms bare, but she, too, seemed oblivious to the cold. Still, she fastened a long cape, just the pelt remains of a fur-covered mountain creature that fell over her shoulders and to the ground. She motioned to Joss and shook her head, but it was more of an appeal to Rasputina than a command. Turning so that he could see her, he recognized her long red hair and defiant expression as the girl he had first encountered deep within the heart of the temple, though she no longer wore the ceremonial robes.

"Mara!" Rasputina said with renewed anger at the girl that stood between her and Joss. "What do you think you're doing?" She pointed at him again and then toward the mouth of the cave. She meant, "He should go." Rasputina regarded the girl who stood her ground and shook her head again. She pointed at him again, and then toward the mouth of the cave. She held his anorak in the other hand at her side. "Is that right?" Rasputina said around a sneer. "Sorry, Joss. But the message will still be delivered." Her arm shot forward again, and her open palm slapped his shoulder. Like a hammer striking ice, the shoulder shattered, sending shards that were recently his flesh flying about them. She waved her hand dismissively, and the ice holding him in place withered away in a second, dropping him to the cold rock



below. On his knees, he looked up at his arm, still frozen to the wall, and blood flowed freely from his shoulder, a great torrent resulting from the sudden severing of flesh. Rasputina was upon him, lifting him by the back of his shirt, stronger than he imagined she could be. When he struggled to his feet, his head swimming and dizzy, she released him and waved toward the cave entrance. The cold wind she commanded struck him again, and he was thrown bodily toward it and out of the cave, rolling on the snowy ledge beneath the dark eye of the storm once more. He had no strength and could not hope to survive the mountain as he was, wounded and exposed. His blood pooled beneath him, freezing quickly to his side. "Do you see now, Joss?" she questioned angrily, motioning to the clouds swirling above him. "Do you see? Tell Ramos that the storm is mounting! Tell him that! You want to be like him, Joss! Tell him you need a new right hand just like his. Tell him that if he sends his 'Right-hand man' back as an errand boy, I'll rip it right off! Tell him!" He struggled to his knees, confused and unsure what he might do next, vaguely and instinctively fighting against the inevitable. She kicked him in the stomach hard enough to throw him over the edge of the ledge where he had climbed with his axes, exhausted. The wall of wind hit him, buffeting him against the side of the cliff, knocking him about as it propelled him to the snow-covered rocks dozens of feet below. The blanket of snow softened his fall, but the jagged cliff had further torn his flesh and broken several of his bones, including a number of his ribs, making his breathing painful and laborious. The cold numbed him at once, and he knew it would race against his blood loss to kill him. He suspected the cold would kill him first. He didn't fight against it, knowing that if the cold had its way, he would drift off to sleep and die rather gently. The Silent One, Mara, fell beside him, having leapt from the cliff above. She landed on her feet in a crouch, her hair flowing from her fall and the wind that raged. The fur hide billowed behind her, leaving very little protection against the elements. She didn't need it, he realized. He thought for a moment she might have descended upon him to finish him off. It would have been an act of mercy. Instead, she pressed her hand upon his chest, and he felt himself chill, freezing from the inside rather than having the cold drain the heat from him. He briefly thought she was freezing him as Rasputina had his arm, but it brought no pain. In fact, it equalized his temperature so that the pain of the external cold was tolerable, though he knew it was cold enough to freeze a man in minutes. Concentrating, she closed her eyes, focusing her power. As she meditated he felt his veins flowing with ice, so cold it felt like razors coursing within him. Rather than hurting, however, it brought him some comfort and his shoulder, he saw, cauterized, and he breathed more comfortably. She continued concentrating, running his blood cold, healing him. He heard Rasputina's voice echo on the wind from above them. She howled, "Take him, Mara! Take him down! Take him to Ramos! See that he gets the message!" She took him off the mountain, although he would never know how she could have. He fell unconscious, lulled comfortably by her life-giving ministrations.