Twisting fates - At Death’s Door

September 20

The Event. At the point of impact.

Francisco drew a foot forward, bracing himself on the

ground, cradling Perdita’s head in the crook of his left

arm. “We’re in trouble,” she had said moments earlier

and then stiffened as solid as a knotwood plank. She

stared beyond him with eyes still covered in a shroud of

black and purple with occasional swirls of silver, like a

brief glimpse of a comet in a night sky. Her breathing

was so short and shallow he could scarcely tell whether

she was alive. His pistol drawn, he held it gingerly as he

pulled a strand of hair from her face, stuck to her cheek

by a thin film of sweat.

Several paces away, between them and the gaping hole

that stretched for miles eastward, stood Santiago, his

feet firmly planted apart. Screeching and bellowing

howls echoed from the pit as if the very gates of Hell

had been opened. “Don’t worry, ‘Cisco!” he bellowed.

“Whatever comes out of that hole will have to kill me

twice before I let it by!” He sounded almost convincing

as the far surface near the edge of the great chasm

continued to break apart and fall, creating an ever

growing jagged pit that stretched on and on, swallowing

rock and tree like the insatiable jaws of an unholy god.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of creatures clamored

up the side of the sheer rock wall, exposed to the rising

sun for the first time in centuries. The Ortegas could

hear them drawing nearer as the shrieking grew louder,

more distinct. They heard the falling rocks clatter,

dislodged by the climbing creatures. Clacking claws and

low rumbling moans soon joined the wild shrieking.

“What’s comin’, ‘Cisco?” Niño asked beside him,

fidgeting nervously with his rifle.

“Don’t know,” Francisco said as calmly as he could.

“Move off a ways, boy. You’re more valuable behind

cover anyways.” He just hoped they might buy some

time for Niño to high tail it out of there. Francisco

considered running, too, but knew they’d not get far

having to carry Perdita. Niño hesitated but Francisco

said, “Go on, now. Get a good shot back there a ways,”

and the young man reluctantly withdrew.

“Come on, you sons-a-bitches!” Santiago bellowed at

the hole. “Let’s see what’cha got!”

Francisco hugged his sister close to him and said to her,

“I’m sorry, Perdita. You shouldn’t even be out here.

Maybe none of us should. Sounds like we’re in for a

helluva time, though. Could use your guns a long as

you’re here, too.” He sighed and then cocked his

Peacebringer, loaded with the ‘witched bullets created

by Criid and the witch-hunter division. “You always

managed to get by on your own,” he said to her. “Let’s

see if we can get you through this.”

He leveled the gun on the lip of the chasm before

Santiago. He wondered what Abuela would say about

them. Probably a string of profanity about their reckless

irresponsibility. He smiled weakly.

He could not have prepared himself for what came out

of the pit. He half expected some Nephilim monstrosity,

but a thickly muscled forearm rose up and drove taloned

fingers deep into the moist dirt beside the edge and

pulled a creature above the side that looked at first

human as its head and vacant eyes rose. But its lower

jaw was missing, clearly torn from its head as the dried

flesh had hardened into a jagged edge around its neck

and below its cheek. Even the throat and a great portion

of its upper chest were gone, leaving an open cavity

exposed to the spine at its back. It could not be living,

and as it pulled itself further beyond the edge, Francisco

saw the machinery connected to it, driving the physical

remains like a grotesque abomination. But he had seen

Guild sketches on grafting abominations that turned the

stomach and led to the creation of Hoffman’s charter

and division. What he saw before him was somehow

more vile, and, most disturbing of all, it looked old,

perhaps over a hundred years, near the time of the first

breach opening. The large barrel drum imbedded into

its back looked more like raw iron beaten into shape

from a forge. No furnace was visible, and no steam

issued from exhaust pipes or vents, but its every move

was accentuated by an audible whisper of air released

or sucked into its mechanical system.

It righted itself on the soft ground, still moist, though

most of the standing water in the area had quickly

drained over the side of the pit and down into its dark

depths. As it stood upright, its entire torso bent

backward so that its “face” aimed straight up. Whether

it carried too much weight on the machinery integrated

into its back or it had become broken and deformed,

Francisco could not tell.

Santiago neither cared nor hesitated as he fired his

Peacebringer, striking it in its shoulder. It, too, did not

hesitate as it shuffled toward him, seemingly unfazed

and unconcerned about the wound. He fired once

more, and it toppled silently to the ground and made

no further movement. The two brothers waited

expectantly for it to rise again, but it did not.

Santiago glanced over his shoulder and Francisco, still

cradling his sister. “That was easy,” he said.

“Si.” But neither took comfort in it. The strange shrieking

and howling rose from the chasm. Countless more were

climbing the sheer wall of the hole, desperate, like

moths, to reach the light in their otherwise dark

existence.

Three more erupted from the pit at once, charging

Santiago. Their bodies were each distinctly different and

bore strikingly different mechanical apparatus and

various removed body parts. One was man-sized and

missing not only its left arm but its entire head as well.

It loped directly toward Santiago with its one good arm

outstretched. Another was a remarkably fast creature

that had its head, torso, and both arms intact, but was

severed at the waist, dragging part of its ancient

apparatus connected just below the end of its

desiccated flesh as it also bound toward Santiago with

its arms propelling it like a jackrabbit. The brothers made

quick work of them and Niño, hidden a ways behind

them, took the third. He fired again at another strange

creature just coming over the edge.

More came quickly. “Come on!” Santiago bellowed.

“Come on you hijos de putas!”

They fired almost without aiming and reloaded as

quickly, but the inhuman creatures kept coming. They

were easily dispatched, but within moments of the

appearance of the first ones, the edge of the pit was

thick with twisted horrors climbing over themselves to

get to the Ortegas. Soon, there was a low mound of

their corpses that even more clambered over.

It took little time for the Ortegas to determine the single

spot each odd abomination had where the mechanika

drove and powered it. Their guns rang out, echoing

through the forested region behind them and down into

the dark pit before them. They fired as rapidly as

possible, but reloading was slower than they could

afford. It was while reloading that these partial remains

of forgotten corpses overwhelmed Santiago. They leapt

upon him, raking dirt encrusted nails across his cheek.

One without arms bit into his thigh, and he brought his

knee up sharply, striking it violently, and its spine

snapped. He slashed at them with the blades mounted

to the handles of his pistols while Francisco and Niño

fired upon them. The creatures swarmed Santiago who

struggled desperately beneath their terrible assault, and

Francisco no longer aimed at all, firing randomly into the

mass.

Santiago could not withstand them, but he fought

valiantly even as they brought him to a knee. Francisco

drew himself up, setting Perdita’s head gently upon a

bed of moss. “I’m sorry, ‘Dita,” he said. He pulled his

dueling sword from its sheath, firing his remaining

bullets into the creatures nearest to Santiago. “Niño!”

he called. “Time for you to go!” but Niño’s rifle

continued to bark behind them, and each of his shots

were true, taking out one abomination after another.

“Go!” he commanded once more, releasing the last of

his bullets into the decayed remains of the first to reach

him. But he knew Niño would not leave. Probably not

even after he and his brother had fallen. No, Francisco

knew that Niño was a true Ortega, and he’d stubbornly

stand against any adversary. Francisco’s sword slashed

upwards into one of the creatures, ending it with the

same ease with which they had taken out the dozens

before. The blade came down in an arc, and he spun,

cutting another in half as he slashed around to take

another.

Niño’s rifle went silent. Perhaps he fled after all,

Francisco thought. However, Niño had exhausted his

bullets. To his credit, every shot he fired had killed its

target.

Francisco toppled backward as they wrapped around

his legs, biting and scratching and pulling at him. The

horrible abomination that finally toppled him had no

arms, and the top half of its head was removed in a

clean line through the bridge of its nose. Its lower jaw

hung slack, and it could not bite. Francisco couldn’t tell

how it could have even found him with no eyes, ears cut

through, and open skull completely empty. It struck him

with the stump of its head, whipping its torso at him

faster than he thought possible. As he fell, the creature

At Death’

s Do

struck at him over and over like a hammer at his ribs.

He struggled to push the thing aside and get his feet

under him once more, but they pounced upon him, now

tearing at his face and neck.

He didn’t give up though he knew it was over. He could

not see her through the abomination covering his face,

but knew they were on Perdita, too.

A great whinnying bleat issued from beyond the pit’s

edge like the screeching nails of a hateful school marm

on the blackboard, but amplified and horrible. It chilled

him. The abominations upon him went rigid, frozen and

inanimate like statues. Only a moment passed, and they

slowly shifted, ready to resume the assault, but the

screeching came reverberating out of the great chasm,

now louder, closer than before.

The abominations upon him reluctantly crawled or

dragged themselves away, leaving him panting for

breath on his back in the mud. He rolled to an elbow,

grabbing his sword that had been pulled from him.

Santiago, too, was left, beaten with bloody lacerations

across every exposed part of his body. Pushing himself

up, weak and wounded, he said, “I’m not having a good

day, ‘Cisco.” Despite their dire circumstances, he tried

to laugh but coughed up blood and spat it on the ground

before him.

The sound of hooves striking the rock rose from the

chasm. A curved sickle blade lifted above the rim and

sank deep into the soil and pulled taut. The gray foreleg

of a horse appeared, and its hoof struck into the mud,

sinking deeply as it pulled its great weight. The skin was

loose and dry in death, like the other abominations. Its

other foreleg struck the ground. Large patches of its

flesh were removed altogether, showing flexing

striations of muscle with thin black tubes protruding and

running up its leg. A massive horse skull rose above the

edge. Most of it was exposed bone, but tattered

remains of leathery flesh dangled from around its jaws

and shoulders. Instead of a mane, metal plates

overlapped down its neck, each rising to a sharp point

along its back. Its eyes were empty sockets, but it leveled

its head at Santiago, and twin pinpoints of bright green

light flashed from the depths. It snorted loudly and two

shots of steam blasted from the open holes of its nostrils

on either side of a black iron spike screwed into the

bone.

It heaved, and the great bulk of it surfaced. The Rider’s

arm was merely animated bone pulling at the great

scythe. It towered before Santiago. The massive horse,

dead, powered by some grotesque magic that merged

the corpse and the machinery, regarded him in a steady,

detached stare. The Rider’s bare skull swiveled on a neck

of dry muscle and articulated bands of metal, surveying

the Ortegas and the landscape it might not have beheld

for many years. It had no lower jaw, and its throat was

sunken and unusable, yet it growled a command that

was a shrill hiss like a steam valve releasing a bit of

excess pressure from deep within. The abominations

near them scampered away.

The Dead Rider spoke in that whistling wind to Francisco

and Santiago. No doubt it tried to say something, but its

words were unintelligible to them. They had

interrogated many Neverborn and whatever language

the strange being spoke sounded distinctly different

from anything they had ever heard before. It lurched

forward in the saddle and bellowed in rage, the words

shaking them as it howled like a gale.

It raised the scythe above its head, still bellowing

incomprehensibly, and that’s when Niño came charging

from the side, bursting from the underbrush. He

screamed as he leapt high into the air. His rifle was his

club, and he held it back as far as he could. At the last

second, he jerked it forward to strike the rider in its skull

with all the might of his lithe body and incredible

momentum.

The rifle butt hit its head with the sound of a pebble

thrown against a barn door and with about the same

effect. The Rider didn’t flinch or seem to notice. Niño

even knocked the wind out of himself as his body struck

the side of the towering creature.

Santiago, however, hit the monstrous figure from the

other side, and he carried far more mass and

momentum than his cousin. His shoulder struck the

Rider, and he pushed mightily against the saddle to

dismount the creature, assuming it would be more

assailable on its back, unable to wield that sinister

scythe. The horse, imbalanced from Santiago’s charge,

took a step, and the Rider did get knocked back. But it

was much more resilient than the small abominations

they could dispatch so easily. It was considerably

stronger, too, not only remaining mounted, but it

snatched Santiago by the neck and held him aloft by

that single skeletal arm, crushing his throat while

Santiago struggled and kicked, hoping to break free. It

growled and spoke again, deep and hateful.

Francisco charged it with his dueling sword, and the

Rider did nothing more than continue to berate or

threaten Santiago while the horse reared, kicking

Francisco as it rose and knocking him back.

In the midst of the Rider’s speech it said, “Gran Kythera,”

which resonated within each of them. It lifted Santiago

higher and shook him as he said it. Then it threw him

bodily against Francisco.

It spoke one last thunderous statement, still beyond

their comprehension, pointing at Perdita as if in

accusation, and charged into the dense foliage of the

bayou’s edge, away from the dark chasm from whence

it had come. The dead hooves clattered into the

distance in a straight line as though it rode with purpose.

“What in hell was that?” Santiago said around a

wheezing cough. The dark bruise marks of the Rider’s

skeletal fingers already formed along his throat.

Francisco wasted no time and, despite his aching

muscles and mounting exhaustion, he snatched the

rigid body of his sister from the damp vegetation. He

said, “I don’t know what it was, but it let us live and it

bought us some time. Vamos before those things come

back.” Santiago and Niño nodded in quick agreement,

and they walked hurriedly away from the gaping maw

of the chasm. Truly, not one of them knew where they

were in the expansive bogs, and they had no sense of

direction to lead them out, but they needed no vote to

agree that the best direction to go was straight away

from that huge pit, and as quickly as possible. So, when

Francisco stopped, the others looked gravely concerned.

“Wait,” he said. “You’re not going to like this. We need

to take one of those things back with us.”

Santiago snorted. “Like hell.”

Niño was too small to carry one, they all knew, and

Francisco stared his brother down. “Go get one,” he said.

“Be sure it’s dead.”

“They were already dead when they came up to say,

‘hi’!” and he scowled at Francisco, holding his ground.

“Santiago,” he said sternly.

“Dammit, ‘Cisco. If one of those things so much as

tickles me, I’m going to throw you over the edge of that

hole.” Not that they felt any safer by it, but when he

reached the mound of abominations, he took just a

moment to cherry pick one of the carcasses, kicking

them quickly aside to find one missing its arms. He even

grunted quickly over the corpse, tearing its lower jaw

off and discarding it onto the pile. “Don’t want it to bite

me,” he said, jogging up with it, dragging it with fingers

hooked under its upper teeth. “We waiting around for

the dinner bell? Let’s go!” He was all but running

through the thick growth, the others just a step behind

him.

RRR

September 29

Guild Enclave

Perdita had not stirred since falling at the epicenter of

the great wave, though the doctor studying her

remained hopeful that it was only a matter of time

before she would shake off the stupor and awaken.

Doctor Carl Morrow, head of the Psychosis and

Paranormal Department at the Guild Sanitarium stood

beside her, wringing his hands as he stared at her

intently. He smiled, thankful to have another prominent

Ortega back in the ward. And the beautiful daughter of

one of his favorite and most intricate, albeit difficult,

patients was a welcome addition to the typical

menagerie he had to feed and water.

Her brothers had insisted on returning her to Latigo

instead of admitting her into the Sanitarium, but when

Abuela was brought to the City to assess her and had to

admit that even she could not help the young Perdita,

they had to acquiesce and admit her.

Doctor Morrow watched her eyes, open since the Event

more than a week earlier. They were still swirling with

purple and silver, and they never so much as twitched,

staring resolutely forward. He still liked staring at them.

They remained fully dilated despite differing light

around her.

“What are you thinking about, my little Ortega?” he

asked her, wringing his hands more fervently, leaning

closer, looking into her eyes. Within just inches of her

ear, he lowered his voice to just a whisper. “What’s

happening in that little head of yours?”

Within the dark fog of her mind, Perdita floated, usually

unaware of herself and her surroundings.

The whispering voices in her mind started to fade as she

had been carried from the site of the Serpent and the

Fallen Red Cage. The voices that consumed her mind

when the purple wave hit were banished when the

echoing voice of the Dead Rider had spoken, sending

them fleeing from her mind.

She fought to reclaim herself and might have if not for

her brothers bringing her here. New whispers joined the

droning multitude hiding in the darkness surrounding

her. Of course, she had only the briefest glimpse of those

thoughts that might be wholly hers before they were

again suppressed by the dark fog of whispering voices.

So she did not know she was in the Guild Sanitarium.

She only vaguely knew who she was.

Kel Darrow Kar, she heard the whispering voice above

her, quiet and unintelligible. Til Gran, it said. Thar gran.

It made no sense, and she sought escape in the dark

depths. Perdita. Her mind came into focus. “Perdita,” it

whispered, so faintly she could scarcely hear it at all. “Til

Gran Kythera Dow, Perdita. They told you we were

dead.”

Who are you?

“The students.” She could say nothing, yet conveyed her

bewilderment. “The students of the Kythera ruins.”

You went mad, they said.

“They would. Perhaps we did.”

You’re here?

“We cannot leave. We discovered it, Perdita.”

What?

“The Kythera truth. The Grave Spirit. It seeks to live. It

cannot live where there is life. We found the truth.” Its

whispering drew faint and tenuous as the other

whispers in the shadows pulled this one voice away.

“They are freed,” it said, screaming in the darkness, but

its voice was so far away now; it was like a gentle gust

on a calm day. “All will be lost.” There was a pause, and

she thought it had left her as the other voices sought

dominion of her once more, crowding her small circle

of light in the midst of the darkness. Soon she would be

enveloped by it entirely. Tombers, it said. He knows.

She blinked, and Doctor Morrow jumped, squealing.

Perdita’s eyes fluttered and she was gone again, her

eyes closing slowly.

RRR

Santiago rubbed his tired eyes as Francisco yawned.

Doctor McMourning ignored them, continuing to

examine a bit of the flesh pinned to the soft wood of his

examining table, worn smooth by the hundreds of

bodies that had lain upon it.

The brothers were tired because of their days and nights

at the Guild Sanitarium. They were not technically

allowed to be with their sister, but their rank made it

difficult to herd them out. Santiago, in particular,

seemed to welcome the challenge of anyone trying to

get him to go anywhere. Francisco simply outranked

anyone that might have asked him to leave. So one of

the two was always getting access to the ward that

housed her. They had a bad feeling about her being in

that place.

“So what’s going on with Jonathan, Doc?” Santiago

asked abruptly, losing his patience even though they had

been there only a few minutes. McMourning gave him

the creeps just like that mousy Doctor Morrow did.

McMourning regarded him coolly, and then slowly

pulled a dark glove down upon his hand, stretching it

tight upon each finger. “There’s something I don’t

understand,” he said.

“That’s why we brought Jon to you,” Santiago said

gruffly. McMourning gnashed his teeth. Behind him,

Sebastian, his assistant, smacked his lips, smiling

vacantly, holding a power saw, the exposed blade well

blackened from numerous cuttings through flesh and

bone. Thankfully, it was not currently in use.

“Yesss…” McMourning said. “I understand. But you said

it crawled out of that pit, that it’s one of hundreds like

it.”

“Many hundreds,” Francisco added.

He drew their attention to the apparatus attached to

the base of its torso. “This power equipment, here,”

McMourning pointed to the steam apparatus. “You said

they all have this? It runs on a small steam chamber.

Build enough steam and the pressure drives small

pistons in this chamber here. Then it—”

“Right!” Santiago interjected with a scowl. “Steam

powered. Like a Peacekeeper. We know.”

McMourning hated him. “Where’s the fire chamber?

Where’s the water reservoir? Well, here,” he pointed,

“but the lower half is gone, leaving the chamber empty.

What makes these things work?”

That silenced Santiago. McMourning’s mind raced as he

struggled to understand the thing. Francisco said,

“Resurrectionist creation?”

“Certainly not,” McMourning said, too sure, too quickly.

He shook himself and then tried to cover, saying, “Well,

I wouldn’t think so.” He pressed the flesh, cut away from

the cadaver’s side and pinned to the table. It was dry

leather. “This is too old. Many centuries. Many. Studying

other discarded remains that were animated and

brought here from other conflict with Resurrectionists,

it seems that the Resurrectionists need a much more

recently dead cadaver.” That part was true. The best

illusion was one built on a foundation of truth, and he

was good at maintaining an illusion.

“Maybe they’ve learned to raise ancient Neverborn

carcasses,” Francisco offered.

“That’s exactly what has me puzzled.” McMourning

examined the flesh beneath a large and thick magnifying

lens mounted to a band around his head. “It’s not the

age of this centuries old cadaver that has me puzzled.

This creature . . . was human.”

At Death’s Door 21

Malifaux Exploration Society

Many occupied areas of the Slums are decidedly poor. Even the colorful neighborhood of Little Kingdom, despite its Eastern charm, still exists in

the shadow of poverty. One notable exception to this is a large villa tucked away in a long-abandoned neighborhood, secluded from the less

affluent of the central Slums. Unlike the vacant heaps of rubble around it, the grounds of the villa are well-maintained. The high walls surrounding

the property have been refurbished; its iron-shod gates restored. If not for the surroundings, a visitor might think they were standing in front

of a lord’s home in London. Any would-be trespassers are deterred by the great hunting mastiffs that wander the lawn.

The villa is home to a collection of adventurous souls who call themselves the Malifaux Exploration Society. The Society’s founder, Sir Justin Cooper,

spent most of his youth and middle age on safari in Africa, enjoying the pleasures and privileges his minor lordship afforded him. Thoroughly jaded

by these experiences, Lord Cooper turned his eye to the Breach, to another world.

On a whim, he organized a safari to Malifaux, killing a Razorspine Rattler in his first hunt. The thrill reinvigorated Lord Cooper’s long-dulled

sense of adventure. Smitten with what he called “a land of eternal adventure” in dispatches to his wealthy colleagues Earthside, he invited them

to join him in Malifaux. Like Cooper, they relished the dangerous thrill of the hunt and together spent a fortune restoring the villa and forming

the Society. Since then, the group has had its ranks swelled by minor lords, jaded merchants, and spoiled heirs. Every member is a long-time

hunter who has found new purpose in the opportunity to hunt creatures far more dangerous than those at home.

The explorers venture into the Quarantine Zone nightly on Midnight Safaris, scouring for quarries worthy of their considerable skills. The Guild

is all too happy to accommodate the Society and its eccentricities as the Society has supplied reconnaissance, detailed maps, artifacts, and hefty

bribes to the Governor General’s office in return for freedom to explore, an arrangement both parties find mutually agreeable. Rumors circulate

that the Society is something more than it appears. If it is so, the Guild has not cared enough to investigate. Perhaps there is truth to the rumors;

perhaps they are nothing more than stories told to entertain the poor residents of the Slums. After all, the Society does not make much effort to

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