December 18Sonnia Criid bent her head against the cold pouringdown from the mountains

in the distance. She pulledthe wide brim of her hat down to her shoulder to shelterher face

from a biting wind she had never beforeexperienced. It was severe, even for early

December,and stung the back of her hand, pricking the flesh withsharp jabs. Small flakes

flew sideways, but it was too dryin the badlands for any great accumulation. The snowcame

down from out of the Northern Mountains, anda single dark cloud swirled ominously over

one tall peakin the distance, stretching out far overhead in a sky litoccasionally with

lightning.She walked from the town, her duster fastened tightaround her torso, but the ends

snapped sharply behindher. The heels of her boots dug into the hard soil, grayand cracked

from endless years of abuse by the cold drywind that beat constantly against it. Sparse

vegetationmanaged to eke out a meager existence, stretching upfeebly between wide cracks

in the hard soil.Samael Hopkins approached her, his head bowed withone gloved hand

holding his hat upon his head. His ownduster was heavy with the oil that weatherproofed

it,but it snapped toward her as the wind raged at his back.A bandana hid his features,

leaving only his eyesexposed to the elements. Even the horse he led, Cinder,looked

dejected and miserable and kept its head lowwhile its mane and tail whipped in the

wind.“Any luck?” she called, voice rising above the moaningwind.“Yeah,” he shouted back,

leaning toward her. “Butyou’re not going to like it!”She drew close to him, and they returned

toRedemption City, a mere six buildings and anotherdozen or so makeshift homes situated

beyond the smalltown’s perimeter. Samael looked ahead at the thickblack smoke rising

above one of the poorly constructedhouses. “Is that Old Man Milner’s place burnin’?”She

shouted back, “Yeah. But I didn’t do it!” Samael hada habit of accusing her of starting every

fire he saw, soshe beat him to the punch. The look on his faceconveyed the somber attitude

that typically showedonly during the hunt or apprehension of a criminal.“Volcanic activity

spread out here? That’s a biggercircle‘n you predicted.”“It’s moving all through this area.

Beneath us. Thesurface gave way out there beyond the Weilandhome. You can see the lava

flowing below. Like a riverrapids.”He moved nearer to her as they walked, for the hopeof

warmth and to hear one another better. “Maybe Ican warm my hands and toes by it!” he

called, feigninga smile.After Hopkins sheltered Cinder in the livery, he joinedSonnia in the

abandoned General Store she hadconverted to her private study. The walls were

moresolidly constructed than other buildings around them,allowing only a bit of the wind to

whistle through gapsbetween the planks. She had a large mug of hot coffeeready for them

both. “Milner’s place just collapsed,”he said, taking the dented metal cup from her

andsipping at it thankfully. Although she made it toobitter, too strong, he wasn’t going to

complain. “Theymake it out okay?” he asked.“Yesterday. Took off before sun up. Before their

placecaught fire.”“Anyone left? Wadsworths? Cunninghams?”“Nope. The Schadles left just

after you and the Milnersconvinced the Wadsworths to go with them.”Samael nodded,

slapping and rubbing his upper armsto get some life moving in them again. “So we’re

allthat’s left? The Hopkins and the Criids? So much forRedemption City. How long has it

been here?”“Just under two years. When that soulstone vein wasdiscovered.”“Two years

and now abandoned.” He shook his head.

“Not exactly their decision,” she said as the groundrumbled, shaking up through the shoddily

constructedbuilding. Bottles and cans on the store’s shelves wobbledand slipped from their

perch with a clatter. The groundgrowled a long, deep rumble from the heart of the

smallabandoned town. It subsided as the two waited it out,looking at one another, expecting

the worst.“Tell me what you found out there,” she said as thegoods along the wall stopped

tinkling against oneanother.“Nothing you didn’t tell me I’d find.”“You said, ‘I’m not going to

like it.’ You find the entranceto the pit?”“Oh, yep. Found the cave entrance. Goes down into

apretty elaborate labyrinth of twisting caves. Can’t figureit out by walking randomly, either.

Didn’t go too far asyou instructed, though I’m sure I could have found myway out.”“You’d be

surprised. I don’t think it’s a natural labyrinthand natural confusion I’m worried about.

Otherwise,you’d have no trouble, I’m sure. There should bemarkings on the entrance walls.

A code or some part ofthe key.”“It’s there. How I knew it was your cave. Marks are old,but

don’t look entirely Neverborn, neither, though I’msure they had to be.”“Go on. I can tell

there’s more. The part I’m not going tolike. What are you holding back?”He smiled and

shook his head. “Well, like I said, you ain’tgonna like it. Some of those ancient symbols and

glyphsand such weren’t the only things written on the walls. Infact, parts of those old

symbols were scratched off andnew writing was there.”“Damn it.” She sighed and rolled her

eyes. “Did you writeit down?”“Much as I could. Got some written down here,” he said,pulling

the narrow journal from within his long coat. Heunfolded it and opened the book to his

drawings of thecave. “Mostly matches the drawings in one of the booksyou had me retrieve

from your office. You still owe mefor that one, by the way. Matheson nearly caught

mesnooping about.”“Owe you? You didn’t get half the books I sent you forand not the

onebook I really needed.”“’Cause he followed me right into the Investigator’soffices. Dropped

your damned book right on Hoffman’slap! I swear that Secretary looked right at me as

hewalked over to that monster, Ryle. Looked right at me.Froze my damned blood. You know

how tough it’d be ifthey caught me. You’re not exactly in their good graces,you know.”“Sorry

you’re in it with me. Can’t trust any of themanymore.”“Not Lucius Matheson, that’s for sure.

Guy gives me thecreeps.”“Not our beloved Governor, either, I fear,” she said, andemotion

seemed to drain from her face as her eyesfocused on something far away. Her countenance

tookon that strange introspective look every time theGovernor’s name came up, but she

wouldn’t revealwhat she knew or suspected. She was holdingsomething in, that was certain.

“Anyway,” Samael said, “I didn’t write down all of them,”as he tapped his drawing there in the

book. She lookedat him quizzically. “They’re not appropriate for ladies’eyes.” He winked at

her.“Me? Not appropriate for me? As if I’ve not heard it allfrom the number of felons we’ve

apprehended.Especially those we’ve purged.”“True. Burning a man’s spirit out does seem

toencourage a most foul discourse.”She read the first graffiti image Hopkins had

copied,realizing it was a limerick verse,I knew a woman on Malifaux’s streetsWho swallowed

a handful of seedsWithin half an hourHer breasts were aflowerAnd her knickers were

covered in weeds.Finishing it she said, “Rude, crass, and not terriblyclever.” She read

another:

Per’aps you’re wishing to die, Ma’am?Down your throat my cane I could cram.Your

question’s quite rudeAsked of my streetwalker brood- “Are they any real threat?” – Well I

am!Following that she said, “Limericks about a ‘Streetwalkerbrood’ leads me to believe it’s

that lunatic –”“Seamus,” Hopkins said, interjecting. “He actually signedthe wall with his name

in one limerick which I hesitateto even bring up. It says something about ‘Me and mygirl

Molly / befouled this cave with –’, well, I needn’t goon with more of his rude verse. Suffice it

to say that hewas happy enough to let us know he was there andwhat he and Molly did while

there. Made me anxiousto get out, even into the blistering cold.She didn’t hear him. She was

staring beyond him as sheoften did, eyes darting as her mind raced. He knew whatwould

likely come next. Well, one of several possibilities.She’d either get so obsessed by some

obscure detail,calling it a “symbol of providence” and pour throughbook after ancient book

day and night without eating orsleeping. Or she was about to go off on some fooladventure,

nearly get them both killed, all to track downyet another lost book in some Neverborn ruins.

Or, whathe hated most but suspected was most likely, she’d sendhim off on some

dangerous mission while she re-reador translated an arcane text.He sipped his coffee and

pushed his hat further back onhis head, peering at her from the depth of the shadowsit cast

upon his countenance. Her eyes came to rest onhis. “I have a mission for you,” she said. So,

the third option. It’s what he guessed. “Of course youdo, darlin’. Back to the cave?”“No. Back

to the City.” Something was different abouther demeanor, he thought. She masked it well.

But hewas too experienced in finding the most minute detailand using it to make bold

understandings about his prey.She looked at him almost regretfully, like they weresaying

goodbye. To her credit, she was fairly convincing.He was better at seeing through obscurity.

“That bookLucius dropped on Hoffman’s lap. It’s important enough.About grafting, of all

things. Hooking up mechanika tothe body. Something I’m overlooking. Get me that

book,Sam.” There was more to her story that she wasn’tsharing. He was certain.“Meet back

here?”She hesitated, which added to his unease. The groundrumbled again, and they heard

a spout of lava eruptfrom just north of the town. It seemed to spark an idea,and she said, “I

don’t think Redemption City will last thatlong. I’ll meet you back at the secret apartment I

keepin the Quarantine Zone. Day after tomorrow.”“Fine,” he said. “What about you, though?

Volcanicactivity’s gettin’ stronger. From here all the way to thecave.”She smiled. “Sam,” she

said. “I’m not worried about theheat. It’s the cold that worries me.” She winked andwaved

him off, seeming too anxious to get back todeciphering the Neverborn text they had

recoveredfrom some Arcanist patsy months earlier. So it was, latein the evening, that he set

out to return to Malifaux onher bidding. He rode late, anxious to get free from thehowling

wind but also to put the pieces together toexplain her odd behavior there before he left. She

reliedupon him for his tracking, but he was shrewd and didn’tneed much to go on in order to

figure out a mystery. Itwas hours into his trek that he spun Cinder and dug hisspurs into the

stallion’s flanks, hightailing it back to theirmakeshift camp in Redemption. It had been nearly

fivehours since he had left and, bursting into the dark spaceof the general store, found it

abandoned, as he feared.A glance at the dwindling embers confirmed to him thatthe fire had

not been tended for exactly the length oftime he had been gone. He spun in place, taking in

themissing goods from the store, comparing discrepanciesof what he now beheld against the

nearly perfect imageof the place from when he last stood there. The smallchanges were

clear in the mental snapshot that soperfectly remembered every minute detail. Basicrations,

rope, lantern, survival knife. Her stack of bookswas missing only two, including the journal he

gave herwith the writings on the cave wall scribbled within. Mostof her own notes were there

as well.An envelope rested upon one of the books she had keptof the translations of many of

the arcane symbols andglyphs regarding the coming return of the TyrantEntities. It was what

consumed her and drove her. TheTyrants. The envelope was not addressed but the

backbore Sonnia’s wax seal symbol of the flaming serpent.It was dry and cool, but still soft

as he cracked it. Theletter therein read:

You never could follow orders. My guessis that you didn’t get more than an hourbefore

returning here, suspicious ofsomething I said or did that ‘didn’t sitright’. Your instincts are

strong. But,unless you catch me writing this letter,then you’ll be too late.You’ll still need to

get that book tocorroborate some of my findings in myjournal. Turn yourself in to Matheson,

too.Explain what I’ve done and how you didn’thave anything to do with it. Offer my workas

proof of your loyalty to the Guild.You’ll need to take control of the WitchHunters.If I’m right I’ll

soon either be dead (as Inow fear and suspect) or I will haveseriously pissed off one of the

greatestTyrants known to us. Either way, I plan tobuy you time, at least, to figure out howto

stop them.You must search for an answer, Samael,and I trust no man to find anything

morethan I trust you.Godspeed,-SPS: Be wary of Lucius Matheson. He’smore than he

seems.He opened the gate in the front of the potbelly stove,cooling as the embers within

diminished. Theparchment of her letter flared up briefly as the embersconsumed it.Within

moments he was back atop Cinder, riding theunhappy animal hard. He rode throughout the

night,stopping only as he must to give Cinder water and a briefmoment to catch his breath.

He hated to push him rightto the very edge of death, but such was his need forhaste.“Hold in

there, boy,” he said as the City drew into sightbeneath the uncanny orange glow of the twin

moonsoverhead. The sun was about to break in the east as heslowed to a canter. He’d have

to avoid the checkpointinto the City. He would retrieve that book fromHoffman, however it

was not a book he was urgent tofind, but a man. A man that was all too good at notbeing

found. A man that just might have the answerSonnia had been looking for. He was after

Seamus.CCCShortly thereafter and in a different part of the city,Seamus stood before the

great plague pit, a mound ofbodies piled high in the Quarantine Zone, smiling asinister smile

as he surveyed the hundreds of victimsthat had succumbed to the Plague these past

months.Molly stood apart from him, in the distance, watchinghim from between crumbling

buildings in the darkshadows. He was not without escort, however, as threeof his favorite

Belles stood nearby, mouths agape, eyesand heads lolling this way and that as they

entertainedwhatever meager thoughts might still be possible intheir addled brains. They

were not dressed for theevening; however, as Seamus was on a very importantmission, and

one that might change his destiny forever,perhaps even the fate of all of those in Malifaux.

Flungunceremoniously upon the mound of bodies were theGuild Guardsmen stationed at the

Plague Pit. Other thanslit throats or deep lacerations from a Belle’s dirtyfingernails, they

wore only their red thermal drawers,relieved of their attire to dress his girls appropriately

fortheir most serious mission. One girl wore the pants,boots (though one kept managing to

fall off for it wasseveral times too large for the slight Belle), and long graycoat of a Guild

Guardsman while another wore themore austere business attire of an investigator.

MoreGuards lay nearby, and Seamus didn’t care to have thembrought to the pit nor even

stripped to hide their

identity. Molly urged greater discretion, but he wasagitated with that particular group of

Guardsmen. Intheir midst rested a full-fledged Death Marshal, nowface down upon his

mysterious coffin, a supernaturalgateway to the aether-world. Seamus could hardly gonear

the thing even though one of his favorites, JulianaMyrtlebeck, was still trapped within the

coffin. Seamusglanced to the third of his companions whom he nowpretended was his own

Death Marshal consort. Hecould not bring himself to fully disrobe the real GuildMarshal,

wanting instead to keep his distance eventhough he fired more than half a dozen rounds into

hisbody before quickly pulling his duster, dripping withblood from the merciless assault, and

put it over thegirl’s soiled evening gown. He decided that a hat stuckon her head and a pistol

strapped tightly around herwaist fulfilled the illusion well enough. He pulled thewithered daisy

from his lapel and stuffed the dry stemthrough a wet bullet-hole in the front of the coat. It

wasstiff and freezing quickly. He called her “sir” and salutedwhenever she passed him,

ambling about with the airof importance, or so he pretended.He had Molly dressed as a

librarian, despite herpersistent reluctance to join him and the other Belles.She was supposed

to record the event, and he spenthours showing her how to use the lead pencil hewedged

between her gray fingers. “You lick the pencillike this,” he showed her, licking the lead, “and

then startscribbling.” She didn’t respond, but she looked right athim. It was an odd thing for

his girls to focus their eyesupon him, and he didn’t really like it. “You were areporter, right?”

he asked of her, time and again. “That’swhy ye’re the one that’s reporting this

momentousevent. Aye!” he exclaimed. “Ye daft garl,” he mutteredunder his breath. “I swear

ye are being difficult onpurpose.”“Kelly,” he called to his Death Marshal Belle. She

shuffledquickly to him as he bent forward, eyes darting back andforth conspiratorially. He

motioned for her to remainsilent even though she had never uttered a sound sinceher

resurrection. “I have a mission for ye, bonny lass!”he whispered loudly. “That cowboy,

Samael be nearby.Scroungin’ and looking for one such as me. See to it hefinds his way here

in short order. I’m in need of him.There’s a good lass!” He turned toward Molly, stillstanding

aloof, curious about her behavior toward him.She was a strange one, even by his eccentric

standards.He shouted to her, “He sure took the bait, Molly-girl!Just like I told ye he would!”

His smile was broad. “Be infor a big surprise when ‘e comes round the corner,though, aye?”

She didn’t answer. He shrugged. He wentback to examining the great pile of bodies,

inhalingdeeply the sickly sweet smell of decaying flesh that mademost men wretch.Molly

knew what he was doing, what he intended. Shewasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. Still,

Seamus hadbetter intentions than Nicodem might, with the massesof decaying bodies piled

right there in the open. Ofcourse, the plague had ravaged much of their bodies,continuing to

devour flesh and tissue even after thevictim had fallen. Some of the bodies almost

fullyliquefied on the inside as the plague left only a black tar-like substance in its vile wake.

Some of the handlers ofthe victims would grab hold of the arms or legs to flingthe body upon

the pile only to have it burst like a balloonand splatter its dark contents upon them. They

wouldfind themselves on the pile within days, sometimeshours. So, if Nicodem had

considered building an armyof the damned from the plague victims, perhaps he hadthought

it not worth the time to pick and choose viablecorpses from the rotting masses. Or perhaps

he did notwant to risk the proximity of a plague that could devourflesh with such potency and

impunity. Seamus eitherhadn’t considered the danger or didn’t care. Maybe both.“This is the

spot,” he said as he finished the fifth passaround the mound. “Riiiiight here.” The sky above

grewvery dark. The wind howled and their coats and dressessnapped in the gale. Then it

went suddenly still. The coldthat had descended upon Malifaux these last monthsseemed at

first to draw toward that mound of corpses,localizing upon them. The girls didn’t seem to

mind, andSeamus was too preoccupied to care, though his fingerswere red and numb and

his boots did little to stave offthe cold. Then, as the wind died, the temperaturejumped,

bathing the entire area in a throbbing beat ofincreasing warmth. The thick frost upon the

cobblestonesand corpses evaporated in one of those pulses, the heatcoming in those steady

waves as if carried upon a strangeheartbeat that enveloped them all. “You better be

writingthis down, Molly!” he called to her. Snow that lingered inalong the drainage culverts

adjacent the dilapidatedsidewalks and forgotten buildings turned to a foggysteam that

snaked its way up and around them and thecorpses. At their feet where the steam began, it

firstthickened with that strange throbbing heartbeat andthen became opaque, enveloping

their legs from theknees downward. As the sky above grew as dark as night,the light gray

steam about their feet coalesced, writhingaround them as if monstrous snakes, and it,

too,darkened to black.

Seamus concentrated upon that pulsing rhythm,knowing that to any other normal man

walking about itwould feel as though only some strange heat wave haddescended upon that

one lone spot within theotherwise blistering cold that blanketed all of Malifaux.Seamus could

feel far more. He could feel the infinitemasses of spiritual energy that called to him, not

fromthe bodies of the recently dead, but from beyond thethin boundary that separated this

world from theaether. These spirits lingered, lost in the void and unsurewhere to go, for they

were not from this world and theirspirits did not know in death what they might haveknown in

life. They were a beacon for the other, olderspirits. And they came to this spot, fueling

Seamus. Itwas the Event, just months ago, that unlocked the greatgate that kept the worlds

separate. The Breach was thefirst unnatural tear between worlds, and the Fiery Cagewas a

stab through the ethereal barrier, not to Earth,but directly into the realm of shadow and

twilight. Theunleashed power of that spiritual energy remained inMalifaux, and Seamus

reached out with his will,collecting it to him, feeling the gossamer edges of thatsurreal power

with the outstretched arms of his mind.The tingling energy was both very familiar, akin to

thebreaking of a soulstone, but also foreign because it wasconstant and much stronger.

Where the rush of asoulstone was fleeting, this power was dizzying andassaulted his every

sense, filling him with power so thathe felt as though his flesh might not sustain it.Seamus

was filled with the dark energy and approachedrapture, finding it more and more difficult to

perceivethe reality in which his body stood, seeing only into thatpurple world beyond with

thrilling flashes of multi-colored stabs through the shifting void. He hardly caredabout his old

reality, longing to enter the world beyondwhere sensation of that rapturous absorption of

aSoulstone might be his, eternally, at every moment.His arms thrust out to his sides, palms

and face lifted tothe heavens, the inky tendrils lifted him from the roughpaving stones,

stained by the spilled contents of theplague victims. The darkness became

substantial,squeezing him, embracing him, filling him with energybeyond his comprehension.

“Yes!” he howled, and hiseyes popped open, now black, mirroring the blacktendrils that

embraced his lower body. “Come, Death!Come!”It was the fearsome Grave Spirit, an ancient

Tyrant Entitythought to have the least influence or desire to walkupon Malifaux again. Only

at places rich in death, witha tenuous gateway to the aether-world, such as theshrine at

Kythera, could he even be communicatedwith. Or so it was assumed. Seamus had

researched theissue well, driven more and more insane with each darkpassage he read. But

the Event had awakened in him agreater understanding of the power unleashed uponthem

all. He gathered it, and in such a place whereinnumerable spirits lingered and were drawn

from theother side, the mighty Spirit could be called.It was at that moment that Kelly, the

Belle that Seamushad sent to lure Samael to him, bound around thecorner of a building with

a loping gate, the warm steamrising quickly around her bare feet. Samael Hopkins,following

quickly behind, slid to a halt beside a partiallytoppled wall perpendicular to the alley in which

Mollystood. His eyes darted from one image to another, andhe understood at once what was

occurring before him.Samael had witnessed nearly the same event not halfa year earlier at

the Kythera remains. He rememberedwith distinct clarity the sensation of fear and awe

thathad consumed him then and felt it again now. Others,weaker of will than him and

Sonnia, though still strong,succumbed to the madness that lashed into their spiritswith the

inevitable sensation of eternal death anddamnation. He struggled against it again, feeling

onlythe need to flee, to escape that which gathered beforehim and could not be escaped. It

was Death. The greatTyrant Entity, the Grave Spirit, gathered and as It grewin strength,

focusing Its will to this reality once more,Samael’s will wavered as the great spirit

soughtdominion.Barely able to concentrate, it was a feat nothing shortof miraculous that

Hopkins focused the fear down deepin the center of his chest and channeled it out

throughhis arm. His Colt barked before him, and a bullet trailedfire as it struck the first Belle

in the center of her back,exploding on impact and punching a hole through herthe size of a

cannon ball. The bullet continued on,striking a second Belle in the shoulder, which set

heraflame. The first fell in smoldering remains, and thesecond looked upon Samael

emotionlessly though herclothing and dry flesh burned.Still held aloft by the manifestation of

the Grave Spiritmore and more imminent, Seamus turned his headtoward Samael and

muttered, “Right on time, boyo,”though no one could hear him. The dark mist enveloping the

entire area drew quicklytoward Seamus, circling his legs in increasingly rapid

swirling arcs. It pulled away from Hopkins and began totake on a hulking form as screams

from beyond thegrave filled the air. Hopkins knew his sanity was teetering on collapse.

Hehad seen those other men at Kythera break, their mindsshattered by the mere presence

of the Grave Spirit as Itonlybeganto take presence in this world. It broughtwith It the stain of

damnation, showing an unholy andeternal realm of unbridled suffering and anguish.

Thatstain washed over him now, the vapor writhing at hisfeet. He would soon be lost to the

great macabreimagery, he realized, his body, instinctively trying tooverrule his will, took

several steps away, back into thealley that brought him here. The momentum of

thatmovement was nearly enough. He would flee, herealized, and they would be lost, but he

could not leavewith the prophetic imagery of his own torturedexistence beneath the Tyrant

that would enslave themall and feed upon their lost spirits invading his confusedmind.Hardly

able to discern his own reality, he withdrew a setof shackles from his belt with trembling

hands. Hequickly clamped one to his wrist and the other end to adark iron gate still anchored

to a brick wall with a thinchain and lock he would use on the arrest of a criminal.He needed

to flee and could not control the urge. Hejerked and tugged at the chains he trapped himself

withuntil blood flowed at his wrist, irrationally crying in fearas a schoolchild might. Samael

lifted his Colt but couldnot aim, could barely focus his will into the weapon butknew as the

bullet flew that it carried the full weight ofhis arcane will and trailed white fire as it sought

Seamus’chest. Its trajectory was true, but as it entered his flesh,the energy enveloping his

bullet changed fromyellowish-white to bright green and hit Seamus full inthe chest and

passed through him. The energy rippledout his back like a pebble dropped into a still pool,

ingrowing circles to dissipate far above and beyond him.“YES,” Seamus growled, his voice a

strange echoingmixture of his natural voice commingled with the GraveSpirit. “AMOST

DONE, BOYO,” he said from across thedistance to Samael. “NOW GIVE US A WEE

MINUTE. I’MIN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING.” He struck his headviolently. As the ripple

of energy finally dissipated fully,Seamus grasped his head, his fingernails growing intothick

claws that tore into the flesh, his large top hatknocked from the thick red curls of his head,

nowturning raven black. “NOW, NOW. SETTLE DOWN, YEBASTARD. NONE O’ THAT.”

Samael understood he wasspeaking not to him, but to the entity consuming himand his

mind. The black tendrils holding him aloft had jerked awayfrom where his bullet’s energy had

penetrated Seamusand finally pulled from him entirely, joining into onegreat black arm that

stretched up and above him. Hisbody twisted as he fell to the ground, and he bellowedin

pain and laughed hysterically, maniacally. He rose tohis knees and his back bulged and split

the green woolcoat in several long lacerations. Where the dark mist ofthe Grave Spirit

touched, color drained away, leaving hisclothing dark gray and his skin lost its warmth,

turningashen and strange as his arms and legs bulged andthickened in incredible muscular

growth and the bonesbeneath them clearly snapped, broken by histransformation. “NO, NO!”

he shouted. “WON’T BEENOUGH,” he roared. His head shook, sending bloodflying in wide

arcs as he flailed his head repeatedlyagainst the ground “WON’T BE ENOUGH TO BEAT

US!”He shook and pounded his meaty fists upon the groundwhich split the stones. “LET US

THINK, YE DAMNEDSPIRIT.” He turned to face Samael, growling incoherently.He spat and

snarled, reduced to more of a mindlessbrute than a man. The dark tendril that was the

GraveSpirit reared high above and prepared to strike like aviper. Abruptly, the massive head

snapped to the side,facing Samael. His eyes were consumed by theblackness of the stain of

damnation, reflecting no light.He laughed maniacally. “SHOOT ME! SHOOT ME IFYE’RE

GONNA!” he bellowed. “RIGHT IN THE HEAD IFYOU’RE GOING TO AT ALL!” Seamus

laughed maniacally,his voice echoing strangely even within his own throat.Samael, barely

conscious as his mind reeled withunreasoning fear, assaulted by endless imagery of

whatcould only be described as hell, had his weapon leveledas well as he could upon the

brute that was Seamus, hisclothing hanging upon his muscular back in tatters, thegun

shaking. Samael swallowed hard and with eyesclosed, let another bullet fly.Seamus, now a

towering monstrosity, growled in unisonwith the roar of the gun, and the bullet struck him in

thehead just as the black tendril lashed downward toburrow into Seamus. Both struck

Seamus’ head, thebullet a fraction of a second ahead of the dark tendril,and the black grave

vapors blew out in a puff, deniedthe mind of Seamus as Hopkins ended him.The blackness

lightened to gray as the mist froze over,and the dark cloud above slowly broke to reveal the

cool

blue beyond as Seamus fell to the ground, his bodytwisting and writhing back to its normal

humanity evenas his life expired. A great pool of blood radiated fromthe gaping hole at the

back of his head. His dead eyesreturned to normal, save the color. They were no longerthe

deep green that so many women found irresistible.Now, stained by the Grave Spirit that

withered away,they were pale gray.