Months ago – Early October“It usually does this when I’m about to die,” Leveticushad said,

looking at the throbbing green light emanatingfrom the large gem on his staff.Alyce wasn’t

surprised by such a statement, nor was sheterribly upset. Looking around, however, she

said, “Sowhat’re you going to do about it? None of your hollowgirls about that you dote over,

and don’t even thinkabout trying to claim me when you die.”The orb continued to glow eerily

below his face, castingshadows above his bushy brows and crooked nose. “No,dear. Not

you. You’re too precious to be discarded so,and your spirit is far too strong to be shunted

aside byone such as mine. Besides, I’ll be fine.”She was skeptical, he could see, as she

regarded himcoldly. “You’ll be fine?” she asked, but it was more of anaccusation.He

laughed, low and wheezy. “They couldn’t kill me thefirst time. Not here. Don’t think they

could do it backEarthside, either, but I don’t remember testing thetheory.” He smiled at her

as if the reassurance wasenough.“Does anyone everknow what you’re talking about?”she

asked spitefully.He shook his head, wondering if she deserved theleniency he always

offered. He could never be angrywith her, though. “I don’t speak to many people, nowdo

I?”She rolled her eyes. “I wonder why.”He ignored her. Something had drawn him to this

spot,and he felt the sense of urgency and anxiety mount. Asthe sun crested the horizon,

spilling its pale light uponthem, a bitter wind picked up, whistling at them as iftrumpeting the

dawn. It was biting, even for that timeof year, and the dawn brought no warmth.Surprisingly,

Alyce offered no complaint. She steppedcloser to Leveticus, eyes wide as she began to

sense thedread he could already feel. “What’s going on?” sheasked in a whisper.“I’ve been

telling you. Trying to explain. Death isapproaching.”“Death? Uh…should we leave?”“We

cannot run from this.”“You sure?” she asked, her voice rising. “I’m pretty surewe can try!”

The feeling of desperation grew withinthem both. “Are we going to fight, at least?”“I’m not

sure we can.”“Maybe you can’t run and maybe you’re not going tofight, but I’m kinda sure I

can do both.” He loved hernaïve innocence and foolhardy bravado. She readied herpistol,

locking the firing gears in place.The sun’s light broke the shadows for only a momentbefore

an unnatural darkness descended from thetwisting boughs of the Hanging Tree looming

abovethem. It was a shadow that moved like smoke or fog butwas not blown by the wind that

intensified aroundthem.Neither had heard the mysterious figure, riding a largewhite horse,

approach from behind the great Tree, butits massive bulk and shoed hooves should have

rung outupon the rocks and sticks around them. “Tyferal mogulmuertano,” it said from the

depth of a shadow beneathits wide-brimmed hat. His voice was at once a coarsewhisper but

also resonant and booming, like thundercarried on the winds of a storm from far distant.

Alycespun quickly, her pistol leveled upon his narrow chest,but the Rider made no move in

response. Leveticusturned slowly, the glow from his staff gently pulsing, asif in time with his

slowly beating heart.He glanced at Alyce and saw she was afraid but her gunwas held firm,

aiming it steadily at the Rider that lookedlike a man, but both knew immediately he was not.

Hewas not alive, but he did not look like a paltryreanimated corpse such as a Resurrectionist

mightcreate, risen in parody of life.

The man atop the horse seemed very much alive. Hisclothing looked modern, his leather

vest buttoned withthe gold chain of a pocket watch dangling across hisbreast. Upon his other

breast was fastened a DeathMarshal’s badge, and Leveticus, at least, knew he mayonce,

recently, have been a living, breathing, warm-blooded Marshal for the Guild. Now he was

Soulless. Hisface, exposed only in a narrow band above the bluebandana he wore around

his lower face, was pale, butnot the odd color of a risen cadaver that had the bloodand

necrotic fluids beneath the skin slowly decaying.This flesh still pumped blood. But the lack of

the soulleft it oddly insipid. Leveticus could feel that void leftfrom the empty vessel that once

contained theMarshal’s soul. It drew in the brightly luminescentspiritual energy that flowed

through the cemetery. Thatemptiness longed to be filled. Leveticus, alone aware ofthe

imbalance and eternal struggle toward entropy, hadcome to see the desire for equilibrium

sought by theloosened spirits of Malifaux.The horse, too, looked unnatural with its stillness,

as ifit were half asleep. Its sides rose and fell with breath,but its sheen was off – the very

hairs of its coat simplydevoid of color and as pale as its Rider’s skin. Its longmane was

matted against its thickly muscled neck andprotruding randomly about its skull. Down its

back, closeto the spine, were thick quills, long thorn-like spikes thaterupted from its flesh.

The Rider spoke again, its voice like a whistling wind thatcarried the echo of distant thunder.

Alyce had no ideawhat it was saying. “Do you understand it?” she askedLeveticus.“No, my

child. I haven’t the faintest clue.”“He says you are the key,” the high voice of a young girlsaid

from behind Alyce.Leveticus remained stoic, but Alyce, typically combat-ready and seasoned

beyond her youth, jumped andspun to face the girl just behind the gravestone near

her.“Jessica!” she said, recognizing one of the empty vesselsLeveticus acquired and

tethered like an anchor betweenthis world and the luminous world beyond. Jessicashouldn’t

be here, both of them thought, but, as Alycewas about to ignore the girl and turn back to

theirformidable adversary, an even larger, more gruesomehorse and Rider stood

enshrouded in the deepeningdarkness beyond her, the feeble light of the morning

sunglinting off armor patinaed with age. This horse steppedforward, the lingering flesh

attached to exposed bone,leathery and long dead. As the dead hoof hit the ground,it

pressed against a taut wire Alyce had set up earlier –just in case. It triggered a catch on a

mechanism hiddenbehind a nearby tree that released a thick branch thathad been pulled far

back around the tree. Under suchtension, the branch swung around with enough force

tobreak a man’s neck. It flew too fast for the Dead Riderto dodge and caught him full in the

chest. He didn’tmove, and the branch hit him as though he were a well-mortared wall. He

didn’t even seem to notice, thoughit should have cracked his open ribs at the least.

Hisskeletal hand brushed it aside where it shook behindhim.“He found me,” the girl said, her

voice as calm and flatas always.“Yes, my dear,” he said to the young lady he hadprepared

as a possible vessel, “I suspected as much.”Leveticus always wondered why she had been

changedover so much easier than the others, almost willinglygiving up her spirit to his

necromantic arts. She wasalready likened to death, and damnation, he realized.She was

long ago destined to find him, though he hadalways thought she had been his discovery. All

the whilehe thought about Jessica being a tool for a higher power,he never took his eyes

from the Pale Rider that firstapproached them. Alyce shot a nervous sideways glance at

Leveticus. “Youknew about this?” she exclaimed.“Not exactly. Though I’ve been expecting

something fora long time.”“Maybe you could have offered a bit of a warning?” andshe took a

step toward him.His eyes still unmoving, he held out his mechanicalhand, stopping her as he

said, “I havebeen trying.”The Pale Rider spoke again in his breezy whisper, andJessica

translated automatically. “The Red Cage hasfallen,” she said in echo of the Rider. “It has

torn a holebetween this world and the next.” Her voice flat and herface as emotionless as

always. The Rider continued, “Itwas foretold. The end has come. You are the key.”Alyce’s

eyes widened as she stepped back, planning toescape beyond the Hanging Tree if it came

to that. Nevertaking her eyes from the two Riders confrontingBecause I could Not Stop For

Death 2

Leveticus, she did not know that a third stood silentlybehind her. As soon as she stepped

against themuscular chest of the animal, she spun quickly to facethe new threat, nearly

tripping on a gravestone as shestumbled backward. She looked up into the dimlyglowing red

eyes of a monstrous creature that mayonce have been a horse but now looked much more

likea walking nightmare. Like her, its body was acombination of metal, wires, gears, and

pistons, heldtogether with a little flesh. It snorted hotly upon her,and she staggered back.

The Rider, though, did notacknowledge her, instead facing Leveticus. She couldnot see its

face, obscured by a great hooded cowlsurrounding the head, bathing it in deep,

impenetrabledarkness. The thick hood was attached to a tatteredcloak that fluttered behind it

in the wind, but billowingslower than it should have, as if it were out of step intime, and the

Rider rested a sword upon his shoulder.“The one that has crossed into the aether,”

Jessicadroned on.The massive sword of the Hooded Rider was easily aslong as a full grown

man, but its mass was not whatstartled her most. Where the tattered cloak billowedslowly

behind it, the sword’s metal reflected the sky andsun above. But the sunlight could not

penetrate thedarkness that had descended and enveloped them, andeven more remarkable

was the reflection, disjoint fromtime, reflecting the passing sun far too quickly as itarced on

the gleaming surface in seconds rather thanhours.“You are the key,” Jessica said. “The end

is nigh. Thedead have returned to this world. There will be pain.There will be suffering. We

are awake as was foretold.”Leveticus studied the Pale Rider from beneath thickbushy

eyebrows. He asked, “And me? What’s my rolein this?”Jessica spoke as the Pale Rider said,

“You will direct us.”Then the Hooded Rider spoke, his voice like rocksgrinding together, and

Jessica said, “But first you mustdie.”So startlingly fast was his lunge forward that Alyce

hadno time to move at all and did nothing to protect him.His great sword, now abnormally

reflecting thedarkness of night as the blade slid easily throughLeveticus and out the back of

his torso. Leveticus lookeddown at the dark blade sinking through his stomach.“Ah, dammit,”

he gurgled, and blood spat from hismouth. “I hate this part.” The blade sank deeper, itswidth

nearly severing him at the waist. The HoodedRider jerked and the sword came free of

Leveticus’ body,which fell, dead, his blood flowing freely beneath theHanging Tree. Its roots

greedily drank the blood, drawingit into the soil as quickly as it poured from the greatwound

in his torso.Alyce stood between the three and Leveticus, her pistolringing.CCCWith Jessica

there, he’d have a few moments to fulfillthe necromantic purpose he had conditioned her for.

Hecould already feel that undeniable pull, drawing himinexorably toward that comfortable

and eternal blisswhere he would join the multitude of voices andthoughts of all those that

had already found solace inthe rainbow world of the aether. But he was not ready.Unlike so

many that died before they were ready,Leveticus had determined the answers regarding life

anddeath. As one that experienced the rapturous joy of thatotherworld and renounced its

lure, he alone masteredthe return to the life he had left behind. He had firstdone so long ago.

At that time, he had a vision thatneeded to be fulfilled and a girl he loved that needed

hisprotection and guidance. Now, so many years later, mostof his original schemes had

been fulfilled or, he wouldadmit, were forgotten. And the girl? As decades piledupon

decades, he would also admit that perhaps shewas gone, too, though he still tried to

convince himselfthat she was still there with him, as pure and innocentand unharmed as

always.Time was distorted while he lingered between worlds.It stretched out in a patient

crawl as he could perceivethem, those in the world of the living, moving like lazy,languid

sloths, ironically like ghostly apparitions from hispoint of view, though it was he who was

thedisembodied spirit.He would need to move quickly if he were to save Alycefrom the

Riders. He saw Jessica’s tether line; her soulpulled from her and stretched out from this

world andinto the aether. It was thin, fragile, and almostimperceptible, but he would grasp

hold of it with hisspirit, clutch tight as the great void of the aether draggedhim into its warm

embrace. Then, if he could maintainhis wits, focus, and will, drag his way back, pulling his

tired spirit out of that beautiful place hand over weakhand, back into the cold and dying world

again, into theempty vessel of Jessica to live once more.They moved so slowly, and he was

so fast now, in death,but it would still be many moments later in their worldbefore he could

return. It would be a long, long time forhim. And it would be excruciating.As he latched onto

that faint tether connected to thegirl, he let go of his hold on the real world and his

life,prepared to be consumed by the aether. As his spiritflew toward the pinhole tunnel, the

gray fog image ofthe Hooded Rider swept around, pulling his sword fromthe remains of the

body that was no longer of any use.It swung before Leveticus’ spirit, still slowly, but his

ownspirit dragged to a halt just as it passed. The weapon,out there in the real world, should

have had no effecton him or the shadows to which he now belonged, butit struck the

transparent spiritual tether, pulling it in itswake. As the sword completed its arc, the tether

hadgrown taut and dense. It quivered in space before himas he moved down its length,

heading into the aetherealabyss, vibrating slower and slower as his spirit grewcloser to the

sword. Quick thoughts stretched intoseconds which dragged into minutes.The Rider’s sword

began to pull away, but Leveticuscould do nothing save hold tight to the tether. If hereleased

it, he would be gone forever, lost in the void.He braced himself, trying to close his eyes

though thatwas impossible in this place. Perception was notconducted through the traditional

senses any longer.The sword would not be drawn away quickly enough,and Leveticus struck

it. As he did, the tether snapped,cut, impossibly, and the line flew toward the aetherealgulf,

finally released.He would be lost, he knew immediately, in the endlessabyss. He was

helpless to stop it this time and tried tothink of a fond memory of his life, now about to be

tornfrom him, finally. No fond thought came. Not even ofthe girl he so adored.But his spirit,

striking the massive weapon of theHooded Rider that existed in both worlds at once, didnot

continue toward the aether. Instead, it was like hestruck a solid barrier and bounced back

with a jarringlurch. It was another impossibility that he added to thebewildering

circumstances befalling him.Panic mounted. No other tether lines were near him,none of his

hollow vessels prepared to receive him, togive him life again, were close enough for him to

latchonto. And he seemed stuck in that shadow place whereimages of the Riders, Alyce, and

Jessica were wispy anddream-like visions. Lines and shapes of those in thatrealm, the real

world of Malifaux, blurred andstretched, even shook in a vibration that made itdifficult to

perceive one object from another.He had no heart to beat in pace with his growinganxiety,

which only added to his feeling of separationand isolation.When the face of a Rider leaned

close to hisdisembodied apparition, coming into clarity andseeming to stare right at him, he

wanted to scream orflee but could do neither. It was the cold clean face ofthe Pale Rider, he

realized, staring at him with soullesseyes from that other world. The other two Riders

camecloser as well, and their features clarified as theyregarded him. They spoke with one

another in the alienlanguage he did not know. He had thought, before, thatit was an ancient

Neverborn tongue, but now realizedit was very different. They conferred with one

another,and he was sure it was in judgment of him. Was thishow his final judgment was to

come, he wondered. ByRiders of death sent to drag him to hell for what he haddone?He

deserved it; that was certain.The Pale Rider spoke to him, his voice terrible

andcommanding. A faint echo followed, carried fromJessica into this world like a daydream.

He could not becertain of what she said but thought he understood herto say, “They must be

punished. They have broughtimbalance.” Her voice was too weak, too far away, andtoo

damned monotone for him to really understand.That was his fault, though, tearing her spirit

out madeher apathetic. She might have said, “You will lead us.To bring an end,” but couldn’t

be sure.“How?” he asked, meaning he couldn’t currently domuch at all.“Go to her,” the Rider

said.“Who?” he asked, but he knew already and did not likethe answer.“The one who

commands life.”

His spirit lurched, flying through that misty worldwithout substance like a bullet, though he

did not willit. In fact, he fought to stop the flight that brought himquickly to the bayou and the

Hag – one of the fewpeople that might deserve both death and damnationeven more than

himself.MMMThere was no deceleration when he came to an abrupthalt. He had traversed

many miles in the span of severalmoments and then simply stopped. The movement

andsudden lack of it did not jar him physically, of course; themovement was merely

perception for him, now,although his mind tried to translate what it might haveexpected or

understood about movement, which addedto the foreign experience.His surroundings were

still that jerky fog of shadow andmist blurred and blended with hints of images from theworld

of the living that existed just beyond his fullcomprehension. Still, he could see the vague

shapes ofthe foliage, dense and vibrant and full of life. He couldsense it even more acutely

in this disjoint worldbetween life and death. He was in the heart of thebayou.Finding Zoraida

would be nearly impossible, especiallynow, with his perception of her world so full of

staticand confusion. But his vision seemed to come slowlyinto focus, almost incrementally

allowing him to seesome of his surroundings if he remained still and calm.Before him, he

was now certain, was her hut raisedabove the bog on thick poles, with vines snaking up

andaround them as if longing to reach the woman above.He could see the aura of life

emanating from them likea faint green glow. The living had an aura that pulsedand throbbed,

and he could see it, but only in his mind.It was very much like perceiving the power of

asoulstone, he realized, and understood at once howlogical that was. Only a rare few could

perceive thatpower, even when holding one in their hands, much lessunderstand how to

draw the released power of a brokenstone into their being, to fuse the power to their

ownspirit and harness it. Even when crushing the milkywhite stone in their hand, they’d feel

little more than aquick shock as though it were the snap of staticelectricity. He could feel it all

around him now. All thelife energy enervated him, thrilled him, and called tohim. He

understood that the problem with “looking” aroundhim for visual clues was so confusing

because he wastrying to perceive things with human perception, eyesthat he no longer had.

Focusing on the power of thespiritual energy that surrounded living things allowedhim to see

much more clearly though, at first, it seemedvery much like trying to read a book with his

eyescrossed and confused him as he tried to refocus hisvision.To his left, just within his

peripheral perception, near amound of soft mud and dirt, the surface quickly frozenover by

the snap of frost that had descended uponMalifaux, he saw the bright green glow of

someoneclearly infused with great life. No doubt, one still youngand vibrant and full of that

energy of youth. But noyoung human should be near Zoraida’s hut, and aNeverborn would

not emanate as a human becausetheir life forces were measured much differently.

Hestudied the glowing figure more intently, and the softfeature of a young woman slowly

became clear. She wasbeautiful, too, he was pleased to see. Further pleasingwas her

noticeable lack of attire, even in such frostycold. Mere rags covered her upper body and

around hershapely hips, leaving so much of her bare flesh for histhirsty eyes to explore. She

was held aloft, nearly a footabove the ground, by the throbbing green glow of lifethat both

emanated from her and was drawn to herfrom the bayou, itself. Her head was thrown back

andher soft arms were outstretched and back, calling hisattention to her every womanly

curve.“Heh,” he spoke. “Even in death I’ve time for a beautylike this,” and he chuckled,

finding amusement even inhis own lecherous attitude.In his disembodied state he did not

believe he could beheard nor seen, but the girl’s head snapped forwardtoward him, and her

eyes popped open, glowingbrightly with the same pulsing energy that envelopedher. When

she spoke, her voice resonated, infused bythat power. “And you haven’t changed a bit, old

man,”she said, which caused him to start.Still having no control over his movement, he

didn’trealize that he floated away from her, scrambling back,as it were.How did she see him?

Hear him? Recognize him?She smiled sinisterly, still staring at him with glowingeyes.246

Because I could Not Stop For Death

“Who? Who are you?” he asked.She laughed, loud and hearty, and her voice was deepand

sultry. He tried not to notice how intoxicating shewas. Her hair was pulled up tightly and

wound on herhead in a bun, clearly to get the thick black locks out ofher way although stray

strands fell about her roundcheeks. The insects, amphibians, and small bayoureptiles

moving around below her finally made himrealize: this was Zoraida.“I don’t understand,” he

spoke, baffled at her youth and,now he hesitated to think it, her great beauty.“He said you

would come,” the young Zoraida said.“Who?” Leveticus was growing exasperated. His

mindwas fatigued, and he had gone through such a bevy ofemotions in such a short time

that he was frankly nolonger used to experiencing. He just wanted answers.“Who?” he

demanded, no longer concerned at all abouthow he spoke, much less how she could hear

him.“The Hooded Rider.”“You understand them?”“No. But ‘Leveticus’ translated well enough.

I guessedthey’d be bringing you here kicking and screaming.”“I would have come along on

my own.”She laughed again. “I see they had other plans for you.Stripped you of your ugly

parts,” she said, meaning hismechanical limbs and organs that she found sorepulsive. “Just

the raw man.” She laughed again, warmand thick, but he recognized the familiar intonation

ofeach note and how it would eventually grow dry andshrill, becoming the cackle of the old

woman.“Very raw. Why is this happening?”“Oh, how the tables have turned! Now it is

Leveticusasking mefor answers! How delicious. How thrilling. I’mmore surprised you didn’t

recognize me. Isn’t this thememory you have of me? How you found me so longago?”“No.

I’ve forgotten. Forgotten all about you.”“Lies. Like I said: you haven’t changed at all.”“Just tell

me what’s happening!” he snapped. The glowof her eyes slowly subsided, returning to the

deep, darkbrown that regarded him with far more warmth than shegenuinely felt toward him.

“And no lies from you, either.No manipulation. Just the truth.”“Ah,” she said, sneering at him

as she floated closer, hertoes dangling below her. He pushed the inviting image ofher

ankles, calves, and thighs from his mind, chastisinghimself for being so distracted by her. It

was very difficult.“Truth is but perception. Manipulation is justencouraging another to make

the decision they alreadywant to make. Free will.”The Riders were coming, he knew. He

could hear them,or feel them – perceivethem, at least, galloping towardthem.“Perhaps

they’ve given you to me, like this, knowing thatyour spirit is still very strong, filled with the

lingeringpower of the aether that you’ve waded through time andtime again. But you’re

powerless to defend yourselfagainst me. Imagine how easily I could take you in, twistyou

into my spirit, absorb you like a soulstone. Wouldn’tyou give quite a rush?” He knew she

wasn’t lying. Shecould do that. Any who had mastered soulstone usecould do that to him

now. He couldn’t get away. He stillcould not control his movement and merely hovered

inplace futilely, hoping desperately that she wouldn’t do it.Being absorbed into her spirit, to

be consumed by her,was loathsome despite the allure her new bodypresented. She said

with a grimace, “But absorbing youinto my spirit sounds fairly loathsome though you do

looka bit more inviting without all the mechanika.” It was anodd reflection of his own thoughts

and he wondered ifshe could read his mind like she could read the cards.“I believe I’m

meant to teach you what I’ve learned,” shecontinued, “though I’m unsure of your role in

this.”“They said I’m supposed to lead them. To bring about anend. To punish those

responsible for the imbalance.” Hiswords stripped the smile from her face and seemed

togenuinely shock her.“Perhaps so,” she said at last. “Perhaps that is what thisis about after

all.”“I don’t think we can stop them. Not willingly. ‘Free will,’you had said. Funny that one

such as you, us, in fact,might still believe in free will. Fate rules our every action.”

She continued his thought, “And evoking our free will,twisting fate, that has led to this, the

end we must face.The end we must bring about.”“What are you supposed to teach me?”She

smiled again as the three Riders found them, twoglowing spirits facing one another in the

cold bayou.“I’m not sure what they hoped I would teach you. But, Iintend to learn how to stop

a Tyrant Entity.”“I did not think that was possible. You tried to do thatto December with the

girl and her sword. It failed. Infact, I think it only pissed Him off.”Zoraida nodded, not even

trying to defend herselfagainst the accusation of failure. “I said ‘stopped’. I nolonger think

they can be killed. Not like we think ofdeath. Actually, now it makes sense, your part in

this.They are like you.”“What? Me? How?”She regarded him coldly, accusing him of

somethingwith judgmental eyes. “Yes,” she said, her eyessquinting, her lips pursed. “Like

you. They are notphysical. Not any longer. Not even when they takephysical form like

December did at Kythera or thePlagued did just months ago. They draw their powerfrom the

aether and from us, like we draw it from thestones.” She looked away from him, thinking, and

thenspoke more to herself. “Is that what happened to thisworld? They devoured it, spirit by

spirit?” She seemedto jump, her eyes growing wide. She looked to herhands and down her

body at the glowing spiritualenergy she drew from the bayou, feeding upon itsenergy,

consuming it and twisting it into her being. Shebowed her head as if ashamed at her

newunderstanding. She turned back to him, angry, but atherself. “They’re like us. Like us all.

Feeding off of thepower without regard for our actions. It’s no wonder wewill pay.” She

looked at the Riders and their unnaturalmounts beyond the floating apparition of

Leveticus.“But I don’t intend to go without a fight. I don’t intendto pay more than I must.” She

turned back to Leveticus.“Soulstones are easy,” she said. “You hold them, breakthem,

release the spiritual energy they contain, andabsorb it. But you, more than any other, know

this isn’tthe source of greatest power.”“The aether,” he spoke.She nodded. “The aether.”“It

was torn. The fabric separating it from this world andfrom Earth. Its power spills into this

place. But for theTyrants. It fuels them because this world has grown sobarren. There is not

enough to feed the appetites of theTyrants. They need the power of the aether to give

themstrength. So that they might ascend. Becomeindependent of life and the world of the

living, but notlost – absorbed by the multitude in the aether. To resistit, feed on it, rule that

place.”“But they aren’t the only ones that can use that power.We learned to use soulstones,”

she said with a smile.“We can use this, too. To siphon it from the world evenas it gets

absorbed into the fabric of this world.”“But they’re using it already. I feel it. And they know

howto use it already.”“True. But we’re linked to them even if we don’t knowit. They choose

us. Use us. Like we often create orsummon totems that allow us to harness our

powerthrough them.”“I don’t. I’m not a fool.”She regarded him again. “No, you don’t, do you?

Nevera totem like the rest of us. Is that why you were chosen,I wonder? Connected to life

and death but never thecompulsion to link with a manifestation of your ownspirituality? Has

no Tyrant found you, drawing from youyour power, I wonder? We can leech the power not

justfrom the world being flooded by that spiritual energy;we can take it from them, harness it.

Just as they hopeto leech from us and consume us, to walk among theliving by subjugating

our bodies and minds as theirown.”“You think we can learn to do this?”She motioned toward

her own body which he was alltoo willing to look at. He wondered briefly why shewasn’t cold.

She sure wasn’t wearing much.“Why did you make yourself young? Never mind howyou did

it.”“I needed to revert to an earlier time when I haddifferent mastery over Fate. Before the

threads becametoo entangled. When I could see the fabric more clearly.I didn’t actually set

out to become young.”

“Fine. We gather more aetheric power than we’ve everharnessed at once. And then what?

Once we learn howto do this we fight the Tyrants? Teach all the others howto do this?”“I

don’t know. Let’s begin by learning how to manifestthis power and become something even

greater. See ifwe can master this.”“Something’s in this for you. There’s always

somethingyou’re plotting.”“Yes, always something.”He would listen to her, see if he could

absorb the aetherflooding the world since the event. More than anyone,he knew of it. Now,

disembodied, just a spirit himselflocked in the world of the living, he could see the poolsof

aether coalescing around them. Around all things.Longing to be part of that great collective

voice theywere now separated from.