December 21 Minutes Before the Winter SolsticeRasputina knelt at the edge of the cliff, near

the spotwhere Joss had climbed and also where she had kickedhim off to die of blood loss

or exposure. She could havekilled Joss, of course, just as she killed the priests.Certainly she

had no qualms about killing. Not anymore.Part of her wondered why she didn’t. She tortured

himand left him at the edge of death but stopped there. Butshe knew Mara would defy her,

would save him. Whydid she let that happen, she wondered then and manytimes

since.Perhaps she tested herself. To see if she could stop. Tosee if she were still in

control.There were more priests down in the temple sheplanned to educate. Men who used

their combinedmight to subjugate the women drawn to December’scall, just as she was. It

could have been her, she knew,that fell victim to their misguided attempt at keepingthe

mighty Tyrant December from fulfilling His ancientmachinations. It was a lie they all told

themselves,selling it so fervently that they came to believe itthemselves. She wondered what

might have beenaccomplished if they’d chosen to guide the girls, taughtthem to use their

formidable power to stand againstDecember, together.She knelt with her bare knees buried

in the snow. TheSilent Ones and acolytes believed she was meditating.It had been many

days since she had eaten. The onlywater they could give her froze as it touched her lips,yet

still they pressed the frozen slivers into her mouth,hoping it would be enough. Her skin had

grown morepale, more cold in touch and appearance. Her fur cloakbillowed gently behind

her, leaving the bare skin of hershoulders exposed. It didn’t matter. Cold no longeraffected

her. It hadn’t for quite some time. Frozen veins,twisting tendrils of blue lines just below her

skin, snakedout from the edge of her bodice below her chest andup to her neck. They were

faint, beneath the skin, butgrowing more visible every day.One of the lesser priests came out

of the depth of theshadows from within the cave. He was terrified andslinked along the wall,

hoping to go unnoticed. One ofthe two Silent Ones attending Rasputina jerked

upright,prepared to fight. The expression on her face and in herposture conveyed her intent.

She was not as defiant noras trained as Mara, but she had grown much moreconfident in the

recent months since Rasputina hadcome to deliver them. He shrank back into the cave.

TheSilent One recognized him as he poked his head fromthe darkness. He was on

Rasputina’s list, though not apriority as some were. He probably guessed as much,hiding

deep in the bowels of the mountain, in someunused and forgotten chamber. They would

have foundhim when Rasputina called for him. Now, he surfaced,hearing rumors that

perhaps Rasputina had left theconclave since she hadn’t called for another priest indays.At

least a few other priests had made a run for it andmight have made it out alive.The Silent

One moved to confront him, to send himscurrying back into the heart of the mountain to

awaithis turn before Rasputina. The hand of the other womanin attendance touched her

upper arm, stopping her. Thesecond motioned for her to wait. The Silent Ones hadlearned to

communicate with one another very quickly,and almost imperceptible facial gestures allowed

her toconvey her thoughts immediately. The first girl slowlynodded in apprehensive

agreement and, still angry,motioned for the priest to come out. The secondpointed toward

the other side of Rasputina – the cliffface that would drop to the path some twenty

feetbelow.He watched them from within, no doubt gauging theirstrength against his own. He

also wondered if it was atrick Rasputina was playing and she’d spring to life whenhe wasn’t

expecting it. He nearly gave in to his fears ofa painful death, almost returning to his hiding

placebeneath the mountain. But that would lead to hisinevitable death, and he knew it.

Hesitantly, he steppedinto the light. He squinted and blinked, shielded his eyesagainst the

glare from the snow and ice. Although theswirling mass of clouds above was dark, he had

not beenout of the shadows since September. When she hadarrived.

The Silent One, with a cold and distant expression,pointed toward the cliff edge again. In

desperation, hehad surfaced with the hope of escape, and now that thegirls commanded him

to leave, to banish him, hehesitated once more and looked back. The Cult ofDecember had

inhabited the ancient caverns here forjust over a year. But the sensation of dread stayed

hisfootsteps. He longed for the comfort of the conclave, ofthe group dedicated to December.

But more, he hatedto admit, of the promise of power that had beendangled before him. It

was gone. She had stripped themof their power and position. Even as the higher

priestsmoved to silence her she had acted, freezing them in ice,though the lower chambers

were dry. It was as if she hadbeen warned of them. And they had celebrated hercoming – it

was a portent of the power amassing aroundthem. Lost, alone, and near death after her

escape atKythera, she should not have been able to traverse thetwisting path up the

mountain. Yet she had. Alone andwithout a guide and without even knowing of thehidden

temple.Just her and the strange furry pet she called herWendigo. Of course the skittish

beast had fled as shehad fallen exhausted in the very spot she now knelt.Mere months ago

he had thought they would controlDecember by controlling her. Their power and illusion

ofdominion were dispelled within hours of her waking onthat fateful day of deliverance.He

approached apprehensively. Either of the Silent Onescould dispatch him rather effortlessly

without the otherpriests to fuel him with their arcane mastery. Theyclearly knew this and

stood fearless.The temperature plunged with each step towardRasputina and the ledge.

Also, unlike the Silent Ones, hehad no natural protection against the cold and pulled histhick

bearskin parka around his torso and face. Hepassed Rasputina without looking at her. At the

edge,the wind raged violently just beyond him, and he couldfeel its unnatural force buffeting

his fur-lined boots. Itdrew all heat from his toes, and he knew that a deepercold awaited him

below.He turned back once more to the temple entrance, stillreluctant to leave. As he turned,

Rasputina’s eyessnapped open and fixed on him without lifting her head.She made no move

to attack him, but rumors of herunspeakable methods of torture were enough to terrifyhim

beyond reason. Hesitating no longer, he plungedinto the gale beyond the ledge. It was

instantlynumbing, and the power of the wind threw him againstthe jagged rocks. As despair

set in with the realizationhe could not survive the rage of this unnatural force, hehoped he

would succumb to it quicker, more gentlythan his death at her unmerciful hands. Acolytes

had said she was in a trance for those days sheknelt beneath the fierce dark eye of the

storm, that shewasn’t even aware of them any longer. That wasn’ttrue, although she did slip

in and out of perception asothers might understand it. She spoke to Him, toDecember. She

taunted him, threatened him. ‘You areweak,’ she had repeated over and over. ‘I have

grownstrong.’YOU ARE NOTHING TO ONE SUCH AS I.‘Lies. You know I know you now.

You promise an end tothe hunger. Gorging until we are sated. I have fed onthe weak without

you. I have consumed their innerspark, more filling than a soulstone. I have felt youthere,

hungry, wanting to feed on them yourself. But Iwouldn’t let you.’I TAKE WHAT I WANT.‘Then

take me. If you can,’ she taunted. ‘You scoffed atthe Plagued, said He was impatient and

that was Hisundoing. That you knew the path to ascension. Youwere afraid I’d know the

truth, and I do. His failedascension did not leave the way open for you, but forme. It freed

me. The power of the Event fed me, and Igorged upon it.’That’s when she had opened her

eyes and looked uponthe priest at the edge of the rock wall.‘You’re hungry for it. Thirsty,’ she

said as the Priest doveinto the howling wind below. ‘You smell his spirit andhave starved in

your weakness. It wasn’t the Plaguedwhose impatience was His undoing. It was

yours.’FEED UPON THEM. WHEN I CONSUME YOU,THEY WILL BE MINE. I WILL LEAVE

NOTHINGOF YOU BUT A SHELL.She ignored him. ‘You were impatient at Kythera. Takinga

form used all the energy you had absorbed this lastcentury. But they closed the Breach and

left youdesperate for more. Aching. They opened it again andfed you those spirits. You were

a fool. You were afraid

they’d shut it again, weren’t you? You became theWendigo, and they nearly undid you.’IT

DID NOTHING.‘But that was not the end of your mistakes. You werealready in my head.

Telling me lies. Making me weak.But I wasn’t weak, and you knew that, too.’ Sheawaited his

response as she thought of the image ofthe little girl that lingered always in the back of

hermind, always tormenting her. He said nothing. ‘Youattacked me. Thought to subjugate

me. To walk againin my body since the Wendigo was severed from you.But you were weak!’

she suddenly howled in her mind.I WALK AGAIN NOW. I AM THE WENDIGO.Hespoke as

calmly as ever, just a whisper on the wind, butshe heard the fear that he desperately tried to

hide.She spoke no longer in her mind, but screamed outloud, “The Wendigo, Storm? He is

but a pale reflectionof the power I expected! He obeys Snow as you willobey me!”He said

nothing, but she felt him recoil at her dismissalof the massive brute that walked among

them.She stood, controlling her fear and anger. Calling forththe spiritual power she had been

feeding on for thosemonths, she turned to a Silent One who shared heranxiety but was

ready to fight. Rasputina said, “Gobelow. Gather our Sisters. The Acolytes and Priests, too,if

they can be found. Let them know that they havenothing more to fear from me.” The girl

moved quickly,at a run, but Rasputina halted her, saying, “There is noneed of haste.

December does not come for me. I’mgoing after Him.” The Silent One’s eyes were wide,

butshe nodded. Rasputina’s strength and confidencethrilled her. Rasputina turned to the

other girl. “BringSnow here. Be ready. We may need to slay theWendigo Storm if December

does not give in to mequietly.” Her teeth clenched, and she growled, “Youand our Sisters will

indulge upon his flesh. We willquench our great thirst with His spirit. It will be a feastunlike

any you have imagined.” She spoke more forDecember to hear. She hoped her actions

could matchher bravado. But she could wait no longer. She wasfilled with the spiritual

energy of the priests, which gaveher the understanding of how to use the power spillinginto

this world from the puncture of the Event. Shemust be careful though because December

wouldcontinue feeding and gathering his strength.She watched as the Silent One ran across

the ledge andaround an outcropping of large rocks to retrieve Snowand Storm. It was a

mistake on her part to send bothgirls off at once. The moment the girl was out of

sight,December struck with the full fury of a Tyrantdetermined to see His ancient plans

fulfilled. The largeswirling mass of dark clouds that had spiraled above themountain since his

physical dispatch at the Masamuneof Viktoria in the ruins of Kythera suddenly unleashedits

pent up fury. A thick column of blinding blue energyerupted from down upon her from its

center. Wind andlightning and the very air froze as the fury crashed intoher, driving her into

the ground with enough force toshake the temple below. She felt her bones break as

thepressure lacerated her shoulders and cheeks in longblue lines.She couldn’t breathe as

the pillar of energy burnedthrough her chest. He was far stronger than she mighthave

imagined. Underestimating the power of a Tyrantsuch as December would be a mistake she

could notovercome.Pain rippled through her body in waves. The weightupon her chest

prevented any hope of breath, and thebright blue energy raining down was constant

andstrong, showing no sign of faltering until long after shehad succumbed to suffocation. He

was filling her withhis own great and invasive spirit. Deep into her chest hepoured, fusing his

spirit to hers.Any normal person would not resist as she did; it wasfutile in the face of one so

powerful. But Rasputina wasstrong. She had felt his vile spirit and knew theloathsome

presence. She knew how he would try toconsume her, twisting her spirit into his own.She

understood starvation and thirst, too. But wherethat might weaken others, she knew it made

herstronger.As He pummeled her with His ancient will, she realizedsomething else. He had

waited for her attending SilentOnes to depart before attacking. When He had lastattacked

her, months earlier, she had used the gatheredpower of the Event to push Him aside at the

lastmoment, driving Him into Snow, a girl possibly equal inpower to her, but silenced by the

Priests of December.Had He fully embraced Snow as his vessel, He wouldnever have

ascended, never have grown at all. But,releasing His own infused will after the Event,

Hemanifested once again as the Wendigo Storm, hoping

that He could control both it and the invigorated Snow.He was wrong. They were powerful

incarnations of Him,but they demonstrated his weakened state. Storm wasas inferior to Him

as Snow was to her.She recognized His fear as He saw her thoughts. It wasforeign at first,

different than the fear of a human. Hewas so confident and proud but too anxious, and

thatanxiety gave her hope.The wind was greater than a hurricane and roareddeafeningly

against them.Unable to breathe, hardly able to concentrate, herarcane will was more

emotional than intellectual, andRasputina was consumed by rage and hatred. She didn’ttry

to stop his assault but redirected the energy pouringinto her chest, turning it into a mighty

and massive pillarof ice. As it bore down upon her, its colossal weightwould have crushed

her, killing her instantly she knew.But she felt December pull it aside at the last moment.She

was not shocked. As she guessed, he could not lether die. Too much of him had been

invested in her andbending her to accept his great being. The pillar crashedlike a cannon

blast near her, sending shards of ice intoher side. She gasped quickly for air since the

weight ofthe torrent was momentarily diverted, but he redoubledthe raging wind.She was

dizzy from asphyxiation but used what she hadto twist that energy as it came at her, drawing

it aroundherself. She made it hers for a moment and createdmore ice, but a quickly forming

column that lifted herfrom the ground. When December took his driving forceback from her,

to lash into her, he could not hit herdirectly now, and she pushed at it with her

mind,attempting to deflect it as she had done months before.But he was too strong. The ice

sheath and oblique anglehelped stave off the full brunt of his assault, but it wouldnot save

her. The spiritual well within her was brimmingwith power of her own, accumulated and

stored like noother in Malifaux had learned to do. She couldn’t focusas well as she would like

but compensated with anoutpouring of hatred and defiance that directed hercounter-assault.

Such power had never flowed throughany human, and the lashing blast of energy was

directedat December’s attack, breaking the coursing energy intotendrils. But her collected

power, vast as it was, paled incomparison to December’s. Even weakened after hisbody fell

at Kythera and weakened again when sheredirected his consuming will into Snow, he was

stillmany times more powerful than she could comprehend. Her own small lashing tendrils of

power dissipated andthe washing column of wind and sleet and cracklingenergy redoubled

against her, slicing through her flesh.She was numb to the physical pain and only

instinctivelystruggled to catch her breath, gasping as her head wasknocked around in the

gale.The Silent Ones had joined her struggle, but she did notknow it. Acolytes, too, were

beside her, hurlingharpoons ineffectually into December’s manifestations.Two priests also

joined her, adding their spiritual powerand arcane understanding to Rasputina in the

trance-like ritual that made them collectively so formidable.Even with them sustaining her,

December’s assaultcontinued undaunted.A Silent One saw Rasputina struggle for breath,

eyesrolling into her head as it lolled back and forth. The SilentOne leapt into the torrent and

pulled the attack intoherself, dragging the beam of energy from Rasputina.December pulled

the attack from the brave young girl,but the priests understood what she had done

andrefocused their combined will against it, holding itagainst the girl for an additional second

beforeDecember could wrest it from her and drive it back intoRasputina. As the power of

December ravaged the girl’smind, she flailed on the ice, struggling against the painthat

wracked her. Where Rasputina had withstood hisassault for minutes, it took only seconds to

break thisweaker vessel, and the mind of the Silent Onedisappeared beneath the

monumental weight of anancient Tyrant.Her body stretched and twisted. Her arms and legs

grewlong and reshaped to those more of a wolf than of thewoman she was. Her fingernails,

very much like claws,thickened and blackened into true sharp talonsprotruding from her

flesh. Her face, once beautiful,became elongated and fanged. She lay there, pantingfrom the

wracking change that had ravaged her andconsumed her. December’s attention had

alreadyshifted back to Rasputina. The Silent One was blessedwith His presence, but He had

discarded her as merenuisance. Rasputina had only a few seconds to catch her breath.In

that small window, she understood how easily thisvictory would be for Him. He would not kill

her, couldnot, but He would suffocate her and break her ribs untilshe fell unconscious. Once

unconscious, He woulddeliver himself unimpeded into her, bridging the dividebetween what

He was and what He would be. To truly

live again through her would mark the end of the world– He would devour it all.Storm and

Snow were there. Snow was deep inmeditative thought, more like Rasputina than any of

theothers. Arms outstretched, fingers like talons toward theground, she fought against the

gale pummelingRasputina. The shards of ice within December’s attacktore through her flesh,

and she gasped at each deep cut,making it more and more difficult to hold her

breath.Rasputina pulled ice from the ground in a sudden jerkof her arms, in mounting

desperation. The ice formedthick around her body and up over her head in aprotective

sheath. A small chamber within the iceallowed a few quick breaths. Her head fell weak

againstthe ice as she gathered her strength and steeled her will.December’s fury raked long

gouges out of her iceencasement, quickly eroding it before Rasputina wasready. Within

seconds, it would leave her exposed oncemore. She braced herself, but there was little she

coulddo to stop it. It grew more and more obvious that theirstruggle against December was

truly futile. She lifted herencased arm, and the ice around it followed hermovement. She

shielded her face with the armor of herforearm against the onslaught.Unexpectedly, Storm

pounced forward, long blacktalons gleaming in the blinding light of the unleashedenergy,

tearing huge chunks of ice to reach Rasputina.Rasputina turned in surprise, and the

Wendigo howled,its voice long and rumbling. Its eyes flashed with thesame blinding blue

energy that beat down upon her,now bathing her in its brilliance. As it stared at her, itshowl

sustained, Rasputina gasped and clutched at herchest in pain that struck her more violently

than any shehad yet felt. Before the eyes of the acolytes and SilentOnes, her body suddenly

changed. Her limbs elongatedexplosively, and her face, too, narrowed and stretched.Hair

thickened and grew upon her back, all very muchlike the Silent One that had been briefly

touched byDecember’s vast mind and changed by Him.Her will was suppressed by a feral

need to feed, anuncontrollable instinct. Weakened already, andexhausted in body and mind,

Rasputina was losingherself, consumed by the greater ocean of thought thatwas December.

She was becoming the Wendigo, herself– a creature that harnessed the

incomprehensiblepower of an ancient Tyrant. She would walk and feedlike a creature never

sated, devouring everything. It was another surprise when the thick harpoon head ofone of

the acolyte’s weapons burst from Storm’smidsection, near his side, startling it. The howling

caughtin his throat, and Rasputina, still changing, fell againstthe remaining ice of her

protective shell, clinging to thelast remnants of her self. The harpoon was not nearlyenough

to fell the beast, but it was Snow that leapt uponthe thick harpoon shaft protruding from its

back, andjumped to the back of its head, holding herself there bya large clump of its fur. In

her other hand, she lifted along dagger, carved from some mineral found in theheart of the

mountain devoted to December. It wasceremonial, but strong and sharp. The blade

descended,and Snow drove it through the side of Storm’s throat.Storm gurgled and recoiled

in shock, the glow of its eyesdissipating as the howl rumbled away. She hadn’thesitated and

showed no regret at killing the beast thatwas part of her own psyche. She thrust the

bladeoutward, severing the rest of its throat and its dark blueblood trailed the dagger. As it

fell lifelessly to the ice,Snow stepped off of its back and stood defiantly nearRasputina as

she fought to revert to her natural form.Cold tears froze to the side of her eyes at the

terriblesacrifice of Storm.Rasputina’s and Snow’s eyes met, each filled withdetermination

and hatred of the Tyrant. Theyunderstood one another better than any other aroundthem

might. But both knew the end was quicklyapproaching, and they were feeble obstacles

stillstruggling against a hopeless fight.They readied themselves for the end. Their final

struggleagainst December.Storm’s howl was silenced, but December roared onaround

them.Rasputina loathed Him. Despised the thought of Himconsuming her mind and spirit.

Loathed the idea ofwatching His actions from beyond a mental barrier ofice that would

forever keep her from living again.She thought of what he had said to her just those

fewmonths earlier when she had first come to the temple.When he had first pushed his mind

and will against hers.He had said of the Plagued, “He does not have my pieceof the key.”

She never knew what he meant. Never knewwhat key he needed. But, in the cloud of her

memory,she remembered he had also said, “You must beprotected.” She never understood

that, either, butassumed she had some artifact yet to find, like the

Plagued had the box, or the serpent ring that Decemberhad shown her in her mind. But she

had no item of anyphysical consequence and refused to hold any of theceremonial items

from the temple like the dagger Snowused to fell Storm.The last of the ice was torn away

from the front of her,and she was again fully exposed to the blinding andterrifying might of

December as he struck her chest,tearing into her, consuming her anew.Even knowing its

futility, those around her weredetermined to continue fighting, and even die, to

stopDecember’s rise, and they renewed their counter-attack.The blue veins that snaked

through her upper chest andthroat pulsed brightly as her veins pumped the glowingicy fluid

that was His blood. Hers had frozen manymonths ago. His blood coursed through her,

changingher into the monster that could house his mind, merelya tool for him.And realization

struck even as her mind witheredbeneath His.The key was not some artifact that might free

him likeother Tyrants needed. She was the key! Morespecifically, she realized, it was not

exactly her, but herfrozen heart. It held her spirit like a cold, living soulstone.It was the vessel

December poured his form into. Shefelt it throbbing, pumping the frozen essencethroughout

her wounded and broken body.Within her, she understood his predictions were playingout.

He fed off the great power she had been consumingherself these past months.Weak,

exhausted, even moments from suffocating, sheconfronted Him within her mind.‘I will never

be yours,’ she snarled.I TAKE WHAT I WANT.Aloud she screamed, “Never! You will not

have me!”She harnessed those spirits within her, focusing onefinal strike at December.

December saw it and mighthave laughed at her ineffectual efforts. She was nodanger.

Rasputina though, knew that attackingDecember was wasted effort, He had no physical

formto injure. So she drove her power deep within herfrozen heart, which accepted the

power, as it wasmeant to. Her last act was a defiant scream, “Never!”against the invading

presence. She released the totalityof the spiritual force within her, erupting the frozenvessel

in an explosion that blasted from her chest.Shards of diamond-hard crystals tore out her

chest andback. Several of the Silent Ones were caught in theexplosive force and were

thrown back, dead. Otherswere struck by the shrapnel and spun away from theimpact.As the

sound of the blast echoed around themountainside, the cascading violence of

December’swill blinked out of existence. The silence was instant andterrifying. Her followers

watched her, standing for asecond with her chest torn open. She fell slowly to herknees, and

the darkness that had loomed above themfor so many months since Kythera broke. Thin

patchesof pale sun bathed the icy ledge.Her defiant “never” echoed back from the

surroundingmountains as she collapsed, face down on the ice.