December 21The ground bucked and heaved, rumbling angrily. Allthroughout the City the

inhabitants clutched oneanother as the quake cracked the foundations of theirhomes and

split the roads. Furniture and decorationswere broken. Lives were lost as ceilings and walls

fell.Stepping frantically out of their crumbling homes andbusinesses, the residents of

Malifaux did not find anycomfort or hope outside. Steam and fire erupted fromthe numerous

cracks splitting the pavement, and lavaspewed from the wider crevasses. Lives were lost

assome teetered upon the shaking ground to be throwninto a crack that crushed the victim

between two walls.The temperature of the ground grew warm, and steamrose from its

surface as the frost was quickly burnedaway. But the wind rolled strong and bitter from out

ofthe north where a dark storm raged, the edgesstretching and circling from directly

overhead and outbeyond the mountains and into the unknown regionsto the north.Their

bones shook so violently it was difficult to stand,and the tremors sent pain shooting through

them,knocking most to the ground. The wind bit into theirflesh, slicing into them like daggers.

Darkness loomedabove, blotting out the pale afternoon sun and bringingdarkness upon

them. Black fog snaked its way throughalleys and narrow streets, up the sloping hills of the

Cityto the more populated region of the Northern Gates. Itemanated from the Plague Pit to

envelop everyone inits inky opacity so that they struggled against the tumultin near

blindness. Almost all believed they wouldn’tsurvive more than a few minutes now, and

peopleclutched desperately at anyone near to avoid lonelinessat what they believed was the

end of all their lives.No voice or cry could be heard above the quaking andmoaning of the

rocks below and the deafening windattacking from above.As quickly and violently as it had

come upon them, therumbling ground suddenly calmed, only their bodiescontinued to shake

as they began to recover. The windsilenced, and the gale that pressed against them

soviolently lost its strength and blew gently againstexposed flesh. Still cold, it was so warm

in contrast thatpeople gasped, feeling comforted by the calm andgentle breeze upon them.

Many were uncertainwhether they remained alive or had died and this wastheir joining lost

loved ones in the dark afterlife. But thedarkness surrounding them, also dissipated in the

spanof several quick and frantic breaths. People lookedaround in shock and confusion as

they began to sit upslowly, expecting the reprieve to be temporary, soonreturning them to

the apocalyptic events that sought toend them. Their wide eyes looked around,

andmomentarily, light broke through the gray clouds above,bathing them in sudden

warmth.The silence was startling. In the distance, some blocksaway, they heard the wailing

of a child, the painedmoans of the wounded dimly joining some secondslater. They had been

spared.RRROn the edge of the Quarantine Zone, beside the pit ofthe plagued victims,

Samael Hopkins struggled to wake,to dispel the stupor that sought to drag him comatose.He

had lost consciousness but could not be certain ofthe length of the darkness and stupor.

Even now,fighting against it, his head lolled, and his eyes were fartoo heavy to open. They

flickered, and he nearly gave into the weakness that sought to suppress him. But hesaw the

blurry image of Molly stooping over the graybody of Seamus, the lunatic with the ridiculous

top hats.Hopkins had little left, yet his senses came briefly tosome clarity, and the image of

the girl came slowly intofocus.She might have been lovely in life, but her pallor

wasgrotesque and unnatural and revolting as of old meat,too spoiled to consume. It was a

strange analogy tomake for a person walking amongst them, but he foundher both revolting

and alluring at once. Her facialfeatures were slack and emotionless as she

regardedSeamus. The blackness had dissipated, he realized, and the sunglinted off of a

green gem she held between her thumb

and forefinger. She pressed it against the gray flesh of hisforehead and pushed hard, though

she gave no visibleexpression of exertion. Hopkins watched, slipping in andout of lucidity.

The stupor that enveloped Samael’s senses dissipatedslowly.Molly pushed her whole weight

down upon his forehead.In her hand was the large green gem. She was pressingit into the

bullet hole that had ended him.‘What the hell?’ Hopkins thought, confusion replacingthe last

vestiges of fear that lingered at the base of hismind. Strangely, with each pressing upon the

gem, he felta sudden surge of anathema toward Seamus andunreasonable fear of the

damnation that surroundedhim. A final urging upon the gem sank the green stonethrough the

skull and into the brain beneath. Like apebble dropped into a still pool, a ripple on the air

passedover Samael Hopkins like the resonance of a gong.Seamus’ dead body twitched.

Hopkins felt the dissipatingfear suddenly return in a deluge, and his fearful gaspcaught in his

throat. Seamus twitched again, his handturning over on the cobblestone in the pool of his

ownblood, blackened by the stain of damnation thatconsumed him. Abruptly twisting, he sat

bolt upright, hiseyes wide and confused as he looked about. The flesh ofhis ghastly wound

stretched and pulled to cover thebullet hole, and as it sealed, his dead gray eyes

beganglowing bright green. They darted about in confusion,making him look briefly normal

as anyone in suchphenomenal circumstances might feel panic andbewilderment. But then

his high arching brows drewangrily down over his unnatural eyes, and his broadmaniacal

smile returned.“Ah, no,” Seamus said, his voice more or less back tonormal, but Hopkins

thought he detected a strange andsubtle echo in the voice. “Molly! Damn ye. What d’yethink

ye’re doing?” She said nothing. She had no visibleemotion whatsoever, if she were even still

capable offeeling anything. The dark gray of his skin slowly resumed its more paleand

pinkish hue as he pulled the dandy’s shirt from hisback, now just tattered rags from the

gargantuan growththat had shredded it to pieces. Seamus pointed to asevered head beside

the two, against other bodies slungonto the pit. He accused, “You put ‘er up to this, didn’tye?

You!”The head spoke, Samael saw, but he couldn’t make outwhat it said. He was

aghast.Seamus continued, saying, “Now I be doubly damned,Tombers. You said you and

the Tear could bring me backbut ye didn’t say ye’d be sticking it in me damned head!Not a

lot of room in there for me, the Spirit, and theGorgon, ye blasted imbecile. I’ll be leaving ye

here onthe pit to think about what ye’ve done. Both of ye.” Heturned back to Molly and spat,

“And you! I gave ye life!I can take it from ye, too.” He stood, sputtering andcursing. He saw

Samael, chained to the iron fence.Chained by his own tools, chained and trapped.

TheResurrectionist looked quickly around and found theoutlandish hat that towered

ridiculously above his head.He pushed it down over his head. Still sputteringincoherently,

Seamus approached him angrily.Hopkins struggled against the chains, confused by hisown

desperately fashioned lashings that made littlesense. He had bound himself in the throes of

the mostunreasonable fear. He’d never be able to get free intime. Seamus was right upon

him when Hopkinsgrabbed the Colt from the ground near him. He lifted itand fired. Seamus

flinched. The bullet, however, struckthe hat, knocking it once more from his head.

Seamusjumped and flailed briefly in surprise, looking back atthe hat rolling away from him, a

large hole through thecenter of it. “Damn ye are the lousiest shot with thatthing I have ever

heard of,” he yelled angrily.Samael leveled it upon him, sure that he’d take thelunatic’s head

off with the next shot. He pulled thetrigger. It clicked, but did not fire. He gasped. Betweenthe

two were the rest of his bullets, there on the ground.Both men saw them.Seamus turned to

Molly, standing off behind him. “Youemptied the gun, didn’t ye?” he called to her. “One inthe

chamber, too, Molly, Dear.” He shook his head,cursing her briefly.Hopkins lunged toward the

bullets, but they were justbeyond his reach. He jerked and tugged at the gate, thechains

bruising and lacerating his flesh. Desperately hepulled, nearly breaking his hand. He sought

to pull freeeven if it meant tearing his hand off.Seamus stood above the bullets, then bent to

lookHopkins in the face. His eyes glowed green and the skinaround them began to turn pale,

the ashen pallor

moving in a most disturbing manner as it slowly spread.The odd echo returned to Seamus’s

speech as hegrowled, “She be not that bright,” of Molly. “But shemeans well. You could ‘ave

killed me, boyo. You oftenmiss when ye’re target’s so close?” The gray of his fleshreceded

once again though his eyes retained theluminescent green.Hopkins recoiled, pulling himself

against the gate uponwhich he was lashed, preparing for the death that wasabout to be

delivered. “No,” he said calmly. “I don’t oftenmiss. This close or otherwise.”“Yet ye did. And I

didn’t do much to stop ye. Didn’t eventry to get out of the way. I’ve heard too much of ye

tobelieve I could, either.”“Soulstones,” Samael said.“Did ye see any of the vapor? No need

to twist the fateshere, boyo. It’s strong enough today. We be just poppetsto its greater will.”

He stood and shook his head. Samaelexpected his death to come at any moment, but

Seamusturned and walked away. He stooped to pick up his hatand dusted it off briefly

before popping it down upon hishead. He winked at Hopkins and walked away.“That’s it?”

Hopkins called, surprised. He was happyenough to live but surprised that Seamus didn’t kill

him.Seamus had a reputation for killing everyone thatcrossed him, and Hopkins was bound

and vulnerable.Seamus didn’t stop, however, but said, just loud enoughto be heard, “Ye and

that daft girl, Criid, didn’t payattention to anything, did ye? Left all the clues I could,and it’s a

wonder ye did anything correct at all.” He shookhis head and then disappeared down an

alley, headingtoward the more populated areas of the City.Molly approached him carrying

the head Seamus hadyelled at beside the mound of bodies. She said, “TheTyrants cannot

be stopped.”“Well,” the disembodied head added, full of livelyanimation as though it were

just as alive as him, “not byus. Well, you and those like you. I’m not much in theposition to

try to stop much of anything. Not that I wasever very good at that sort of thing even before I

lost mybody, if you see what I mean.” Molly pulled a dark velvetbag from the belt around her

dress. “Now, Molly,” thehead said, “Just give me a minute!” She said nothing buthesitated

before thrusting the head into the pouch.“Tombers?” Hopkins inquired.“Yes, well, at your

service, as it were,” the head ofPhillip Tombers said. “The Tyrants cannot be stopped.Not in

the way we might understand. Not with themeans at our disposal. You see, we don’t--” he

wasinterrupted as Molly thrust him into the bag and pulledthe drawstring close, cradling it in

the crook of her arm.Molly said, “The vessel must die. Without the vessel,the Tyrant has no

means of ascension.”“They’d just find another.”“Yes,” she responded emotionlessly. “But if

they investtheir energy in consuming the host at the time of thedeath, their power will be

greatly dissipated. It wouldby years, possibly centuries before they might be athreat again.

This world was ravaged by them beforethey could be stilled. Now they rise again. Only a

fewof the more ambitious have made their presenceknown, hurrying before the others might

awaken. Butthey stir as well.” She stood and walked away. Shehesitated and said over her

shoulder, “Criid is near.She’s beneath the city in long tunnels carved by theancient

people.”“Is she alive?” he asked. Molly didn’t respond.“How can I find her?” he called.“The

Necropolis,” Molly said.“The Necropolis? She’s at the Necropolis?” Mollycocked her head,

regarding him there upon the groundlike a dog seeing something strange and puzzling.

Shesaid no more, and the heels of her boots, clearly boundand shod by a master cobbler,

clacked on the pavingstones. They were dirty. Her dress, too, once veryexpensive and

imported from Europe from the looksof its ornate lacework, bore an unfortunate layer

ofstains at their length from dragging through city muckand all the strange places Seamus

had taken her.His boots were filthy. Torn and frayed, too.He and Molly were different than

most. They loyallyfollowed a master without question, their loyaltyunwavering. He was bound

to Criid until death, butoften wondered if her cause was true.

He got to work unraveling the chains that bound him.He needed to get below ground,

through the twistingand impossible maze of the sewers. He needed to findthe Necropolis.

Rumor and archaic references in theirstudies declare it to be somehow more vast

thanMalifaux – itself a greater city than any standingEarthside. Yet none had found it. That

is, if any would-be explorer had discovered it in the depths below, theyhad not survived to

report their findings.tttNear the peak of Cold Heart, as the cultists had cometo name the

mountain they laid claim to, the remainingSilent Ones, priests, and acolytes stood, not

quiteconfident enough to approach the remains ofRasputina, freezing on the ice and snow.

The air bore achill but no longer bit through them with suchvehemence. The creamy light

from the sun washedacross them in broken pools through the dissipatingclouds.The girl,

Snow, turned from Rasputina’s broken form,unmoving before her. She looked down upon

theWendigo Storm, slain by her own hand. Like Rasputinaand December, her bond with the

beast was great. Hisdeath left her with a tangible void. The weather hadbent to her will

through him. The wind and cold andsnow had been hers to manipulate, though only

brieflyand in a limited range. Now it was gone. Part of her diedwith Storm, she realized. Her

soul and his wereentwined. Rasputina had said it was like a soulstoneconstantly flooding her

with the rapture of another spiritenveloping her own in a strange and comfortingembrace.

Now that it was gone, Snow could feel nothingat all. She sat upon a rock near the still beast.

Shewanted to feel remorse if not anguish, anger if not rage.She felt only apathetic and

merely stared at it.Long minutes passed that way in silence. None of themen dared move,

and none wanted to be the first toapproach Rasputina. They were not afraid, exactly. Itwas

more a question of propriety. They looked to Snowas the natural successor of the order, but

she could notspeak to direct them and showed no inclination to try.The thickly muscular

shoulders of Storm twitched.Snow’s eyes grew wide. It had been prone, unmovingfor long

moments. It gave a deep inhale of breath,gurgling around the gaping cut in its throat. It

shook asif wrestling something off of its back, rolled over, andstood uncertainly. The long

laceration at its throat, cutthrough to its spine, came slowly together. Muscle andflesh bound

together before their disbelieving eyes.Seconds later, its flesh looked undamaged, and it

foughtoff the last of the stupor. Storm bent and howled in rage.There was nothing for him to

release his anger upon, sohe continued to roar, the sound reverberating far acrossthe

valleys separating the mountains.The others heard only his rage breaking theuncomfortable

silence since Rasputina’s fall. Snow,however, heard an echo, faint and not from the sides

ofthe mountain, but a subdued whisper beneath Storm’sdeafening roar. She heard

December and He spoke toher.I will not be undoneshe heard Him say. invested toomuchBut

His voice was weak. So faint she couldscarcely be sure she heard it and not simply

imaginedit. tell herHe said in that ghostly whisper,I will comefor her again Storm’s howl

ceased, and Snow looked upon Rasputina.She jumped, aghast and in revered awe. The

Silent Onesand acolytes, too, started. Rasputina sat upright, eyesblinking slowly, weakly, her

chest unmarked and wholeagain and rising and falling with weak breaths. “You willnot have

me,” she said weakly. “You will never have me.”December had been thwarted. He had

poured so muchof His accumulated might into turning Rasputina intoHis vessel that her

death might forever have diminishedHim, might have ended the threat of Him forever.‘You

couldn’t let me die,’ she thought, knowing the lastbit of His presence was still there. She was

weak. He wasweaker. ‘I am stronger than you. I always will be.’I will have you. Soon.‘Never.

I am willing to do what you cannot. I will diebefore you will have me.’He had devoted so

much of His will into manifesting Hisphysical incarnation at Kythera, only to be thwarted

bythe magical Masamune. He had diminished months agowhen she had shunted him aside,

forming Snow andStorm, weaker facsimiles of their hateful symbioticrelationship. It

weakened Him again. Losing her at thelast moment of his consumption would have been

hisundoing. She knew He was still there, in her mind,

connected to her. But He was weak. He spitefully put herback together with the last vestiges

of His aethericpresence. He could not impose a change upon herpersonality or motivations.

However, He could changeher physical needs, and for this, she would forever livewith a

feverish hunger that would never be fully sated.RRRSamael Hopkins worked his way north

as best he couldin the subterranean labyrinth of the sewers beneathMalifaux. Typically calm

and acutely aware of the mostminute detail of his surroundings, he moved frantically,hardly

thinking of the details of each stretch of tunnel.He retained his innate sense of direction even

as thetunnels twisted upon themselves and ran at length todead-end in wide drainage pools,

forcing him tobacktrack cautiously. Still, the tunnels, themselves,seemed to actually leadhim

northward. The less heconcentrated on direction and finding the best path, theeasier he

found it to move forward. Tunnels he thoughtwere wider, or merely seemed a better

choiceinstinctively, led him too far out of his way or even ledback upon a former tunnel in his

trek. Giving himself over to Fate, running haphazardly downone narrow tunnel after another,

he quickly came tobelieve the players involved in Malifaux’s intricacies wereall such pawns

to far greater forces beyond them. Hegave in to odd impulses to take darker passages

thatbranched away from his supposed destination but thatturned around a bend to return

northward with moreopen and easy walkways beside the slowly movingmorass of the

sewage waste. Tunnels he would swearshould better lead him to the north side of the city

wouldhave fallen stones and collapsed walls from the violenttremors that had struck the

area.When he came to a narrow channel filled not withsewage but dark lava, crusting over

as it cooled, just adim glow in small cracks across its surface, Samael knewhe was close.

Seeing the channel of lava not burning hotand moving quickly along the same path caused

anuneasy sense of dread that mounted with eachcontinued step. Cherufe, the Fire Tyrant,

and Sonnia Criidhad no doubt met, and Samael wondered who hadsucceeded in their goal.

With no further thought orhesitation, he followed the lava flow at a dead run.It was under

these conditions that he very accidentallycame upon the edge of the Necropolis.Sonnia had

referenced it several times as an importantlocation used by the ancient Neverborn for

somethingessential in their past, though further references of theacts conducted there or its

deeper purpose were neverarticulated within any uncovered text. Moreover, everyGuild

expedition sent specifically to find the locationnever met with success. If the explorers

resurfaced atall, they were merely covered in grime, exhausted, anddeeply afraid they would

never have made it out. Thosefew didn’t report sightings of any creature or obstacleof overt

danger that inspired their fear. It was the mazethat caused the dread. Reports of doubling

back,walking the same path over and over again or of simplyturning around and retreating

without seeming to evenrealize it was a commonly repeated statement from allof the

returnees. The majority of expert trackers andspelunkers sent down to survey the labyrinth

and findthe fabled Necropolis were never seen again.Samael, himself, had vowed to lead an

expedition to findit, sure he could discover it where none other had beensuccessful. But

Sonnia’s quest had deferred those plans.Now, without trying, he skirted along the very side

ofthis mysterious region that had eluded trackersspecifically seeking it out.He refused to give

in to the unnatural fear emanatingfrom the corridors and alcoves housing stackedsepulchers

and ornately carved images that were bothbeautiful and terrible. As he ran past longer

corridors,deeper into the heart of the Necropolis, their depthsswallowed all light. Despite his

fear, he felt the lure ofthe secrets around him, wanting to explore this place.Like the fear, he

knew the fascination was artificial,planted in his mind by this accursed place, to keep

himtrapped in its darkness.More than once he imagined he saw the glint of lightfrom the

passage reflected from a set of eyes. Turningto focus upon them, however, revealed nothing

save theabsolute pitch blackness encompassing the coldpassages.Finally, the gray surface

of the lava stream opened upona vast chamber. Around the perimeter of the greatchamber

were other passages that ran in everydirection, each of them pouring into this cavity a

similarstream of lava that was cooling quickly with a dark graycrust and dim glow from below

the surface. They all metat this central pool of lava, itself suffering the samehardening due to

the dissipating heat.

His heart fell, but he was not surprised to see Sonnia atthe center of the pool. She was

kneeling. The lava hadcooled, dark and hard around her legs and forearmsbelow the

surface. Her own sword had impaled herchest, protruding far from her back.He sighed,

wishing he could have been there to protecther. He would have failed, too. She had to die.

That’swhat Seamus had said and Samael now believed him.Sonnia did what she had to do

to stop Cherufe. It’s whythe lava had ceased its burning. Why the quaking hadceased as

well.He stepped gingerly upon the pool, finding the surfacestrong enough to support him,

and walked to her. Shewas so driven, so focused. Of course she would stop atnothing to end

the possible reign of the most dangerousof the Tyrants – even before it could get a foothold

inMalifaux once again. He wondered how she hadmanaged it, looking down upon the scene

of her bodydestroyed both by lava and her own sword. It wouldhave been a sight to behold,

he knew that.He also knew that he could not bury her. Not in the wayshe deserved. He

loathed leaving her sounceremoniously out in the open, too. He’d bury herwith stones

broken from the low wall encircling thepool. Her sword would be left upon the mound to

markher burial. He gripped it for the first time. Even buriedwithin her flesh, held in place

through severed bone andsinew, he felt its heft and wondered how she could havewielded it

so effortlessly. It was much larger, even, thanLady Justice’s. He held it tightly and pulled it

from herbody. As the end of the blade was about to leave herbody, it caught for a second as

if in protest. He pulled itfree with a jerk.Sonnia’s eyes opened wide as the blade left her

body,and she inhaled sharply. A trail of wispy flame followedthe sword. She coughed and

said, “Sam!” in a voice dryand broken. “Get back!”The thin fire licking at the end of the

greatswordflickered and was gone. As it dissipated, the hardenedgray lava rock engulfing

Sonnia burst into bright orangeliquid magma, flowing away from her, spreading quicklyout to

engulf the rock all around, turning it back into theburning lava. It spread from her in a ring

toward theedge of the round pool.Samael wasted no time in pondering how she

wasreawakened from death. He ran. Faster than he had runbefore, barely letting his boot

soles hit the hardenedrock as he ran to the low wall, hot lava popping andgurgling just

behind him, sizzling upon his pant legs andboots. He dove over the wall just as the lava

overtookhim, dissolving the rock beneath him, and hit the groundhard, rolling in the

accumulated dust. He turned over tosee Sonnia lean back, her head facing toward

thecavern’s ceiling far above, the lava splashing around her.She moaned, barely audible

above the roiling pool ofglowing magma and suddenly erupted in flame. Herbody launched

above the pool, the thick liquid drippingfrom her. Hovering for a moment, head far back

andarms outstretched, she clearly suffered no damage fromthe flames. The wound in her

chest glowed as if herblood had turned to the same molten rock that flowedbeneath her.Her

head snapped forward, and she looked at himangrily. Her eyes, too, glowed bright yellow,

blinding himas he looked upon her.When she spoke, her voice was gravelly, like metal

onstones. “You damned fool! You shouldn’t have come.You should have just left me dead.”

she said. The firetrailing behind her snaked down and bent about thepool. He imagined it

even twisted back up and formedthe head of a large reptilian beast glaring at himhatefully.

But the fire shifted and twisted, and the heatwas intense, and everything shimmered and

vibrated inhis vision as it overwhelmed him. A gout of fire belchedforth from her mouth,

consuming everything below her.She flew forward on the fire, breathing it down

uponeverything in her path which, unfortunately, led directlytoward him.He could not run,

and there was no shelter to protecthim. She was too fast, and the cone of fire too broad.He

covered his face with one forearm while the otherheld the sword he had pulled from her

body. When thefire washed down upon him, the sword glimmered andsang a high, sharp

note as it glowed blue. The firebathed him in heat, but he was not burned. Even hisclothing

was spared from the flames. As she passedabove him, the sword’s chime dissipated along

with theglow down its center. She seemed not to mind that hesurvived the assault, flying

quickly down a larger tunneltoward the southeast of the city, toward the fearedNecropolis.

The trail of fire behind her formed the headof a draconic beast, he was sure, that snapped at

himas it trailed her. The sword struck another high chord asthe flaming bite engulfed him,

and he heard it growl asit disappeared, glowing brightly down the corridor and

around twists and turns in the labyrinth until it wasgone. The pool and the channels of lava

quickly cooledto dark gray as she left.Cherufe had won, then, he knew. It had

devouredSonnia, even after she had sacrificed herself to stop It.He, Samael Hopkins, was

solely responsible for defyingthat sacrifice, by making her death moot. He cursed.Now the

Tyrant was loosed upon the world to consumefar more than the woman chosen as Its

vessel. Andwhen It was done with this world, It would move on tothe next. Possibly through

the Breach into the OldWorld.Samael held Sonnia’s sword, heavy and cold. It kept himfrom a

fiery death, and he understood now that itsarcane purpose was greater than he could

haveguessed. He would most certainly keep it close.He did not like the idea of confronting

her, but he hadan obligation to stop the Tyrant. He particularly did notenjoy the thought of

entering the Necropolis. Steelinghis resolve, he set out to find her.