January 15, 115 PFOrville Weaver knelt in the dry riverbed. Although mid-January,

unseasonable warmth had pushed in from thesouth, dissipating the thin layer of frost that

had settledin the night. Numerous buckles down the front of hisgray duster held it wrapped

tightly around him, and hebegan unfastening one after another to afford morefreedom of

movement as he examined the ashen dirt.His gloved hand broke through the top layer of

soileasily, and the clod broke into a loose pile of sand.Upon his hat, a cross between a

gentleman’s top hat andthe more wide-brimmed hats of the cattlemen workingthe range,

rested a set of mechanical goggles heldaround the crown by an elastic band. He pulled

themover his face, securing them across his brow with theleather side flaps so that no light

could interfere with hisexamination. Glancing quickly to the sky, he worriedthat he might

actually need some additional light dueto the thick and ominously dark clouds that had

loomedfor the past months. They looked ready to unleash atorrent at any moment. Of

course, that had been theprevailing thought for weeks, yet the clouds had onlyreleased a

minute long drizzle several days earlier.“What do you reckon dried it up?” Louis

Hernandezasked as he approached the kneeling investigator.Orville said nothing. He dialed

the clockworkmechanism on the goggles, and the gears protrudingfrom the lenses adjusted

to bring the grains of sand intoclearer focus. Another button dropped a dark blue filterin front

of the convex lenses so that he could see adifferent spectrum of light upon the

grains.Constance Weber, the commanding Guardsman on sitebarked, “Step back,

Hernandez.” A gust of wind pickedup, and she held the dark gray hat upon her head lest

itblow away, like the sand in Investigator Weaver’s openhand. He studied the grains as they

blew, the opaquecerulean lenses close to the material as it quickly flewin the breeze.When

his gloved palm was free of the sand, he pulledthe goggles away from his face and rested

them uponthe base of his hat once more. He withdrew a narrowwafer of lead from a pocket

on his vest and wrote thefindings within his log.Constance stepped up from behind. They

were moreescorts to the investigator, but, like Hernandez, she wasanxious to have anything

to explain the sudden andsevere drought. “Same as site three?” she asked.Orville turned

toward her and could not hide hisfrustration. It was startling to see his emotions, giventhe

typically stoic demeanor of all the investigators.“’Fraid so,” he said. “Volcanism so close to

the surfacedried it right up. Even if water still stood, there’s toomuch sulfur, hydrogen

chloride, and other elements thatwould make it undrinkable.” She didn’t understandmuch of

the mumbo-jumbo, but “undrinkable” wasenough. He stood and brushed the gray dust from

hisknees. As he walked toward the horses, his feet kickedup small clouds.Undrinkable. Like

the wells that still produced withinMalifaux. Too many toxins from the volcanic upheavalsthat

had struck some weeks past. They had, thankfully,subsided, but the damage done was far

moreoutreaching than the accompanying quakes that hadbrought down some buildings or

put cracks in thefoundations of many more.The investigator mounted, and the Guardsmen

quicklyfollowed. “We going to site five?” Constance inquired.Orville nodded. “We’ll go to

them all. No need to check‘em with the spectrometer, though. They’ll all be thesame. Let’s

ride hard and be quick about it. We’relooking for water that still runs, now.” His spurs dug

intothe flanks of his mount, and they rode a brisk galloptoward the northern mountains,

hoping to find decentwater coming down.Miners were up there again, cutting blocks of snow

andice and shipping them down to Malifaux. But thecaravans could not keep up with the

demand ofMalifaux’s population. Orville Weaver needed to get back to the Enclave

bysunset. Lucius Matheson demanded a report.

tttRose Crowshaw turned quickly at the alley between thenarrow bank and the Hourglass

Hotel and Saloon. Shestepped lively through the dirt that stuck to her bootsfrom the bog

water that permeated the soil in theboomtown of Hope, near the larger swamp region.

Shedidn’t take notice. Her boots were well worn, and thelayers of dirt and oil were as much a

part of theirmakeup as the original leather beneath. They were notthe fashionable women’s

boots of the day, either. Theywere men’s boots, cut for an adolescent boy most likely,as

were her britches. She hadn’t considered wearing adress in a long time. Certainly before she

became asteamfitter back home, and she brought none of hermore feminine items through

the breach some yearspast. She did still wear the tight corset that had becomeso

fashionable in the day, but it was more because thetight garment offered no loose fabric to

get caught inthe gears and cogs of the devices she repaired.Someone was following her,

she was certain. She had felt someone watch her every move ever sincethat strange

confrontation with Kaeris back inNovember. Even after transferring to Hope, a veryremote

boomtown far on the outskirts of the Malifauxterritories, she hadn’t shaken the eyes that

alwaysseemed to be upon her every move.A shadow passed overhead, and she ducked

against theside of the Hourglass and looked quickly up but sawnothing. “Just paranoia,” she

whispered to herself.“Shake it off.” But she couldn’t. Coming to the end ofthe narrow alley,

she hid in the shadows behind a largebarrel, looking back and forth for whoever might

befollowing. She was off the central road, more out ofsight, but that might not be a good

thing, she realized.Whoever was after her might be more free to actagainst her without the

fear of witnesses. But thatwasn’t true, either. She had been alone frequently

sinceabandoning her post at the Breach and transferring firstto Promise and now Hope. She

had been alone in hersmall shack just outside the town. She had been alonein the mine

repairing steam-mining constructs andelevator mechanisms. Looking back down the

alley,there was no movement, no sounds. Nothing in theback of the buildings either, save

the outhouses.Paranoia. Nothing was after her. She wondered if it weresome odd side-effect

of her ability that she feltconstantly watched or pursued. Perhaps Kaeris had notdone

anything out of the ordinary when they met at theBreach, either, but the manifestation of fear

was aproduct of her own out of control imagination.Rose dismissed the feeling of dread as

she stepped outof the shadows. Along the backs of the buildings she’dat least feel more

certain that no one else was nearby.The sound of a scratch upon the roof above her

madeher freeze, and she looked up in a panic. Only a dark cat.It ran along the edge of the

roofline as she chastisedherself for irrational fear and continued on. But the catleapt from the

roof before her. As it descended, itchanged in midair, shifting in size and shape in the spanof

a second or two. It was no longer a black cat, but asit landed it had become a woman just as

her foot struckthe ground. She stood before a very stunned andspeechless Rose Crowshaw.

The woman’s thick blondehair flowed over her tanned shoulders like a mane.Rose turned to

run. She spun, but behind her stood apowerfully built man, his dark skin, tightly

knotteddreadlocks, and thickly muscled torso, exposed to thewinter elements made him

seem primal. How he snuckup behind her, without a sound and from out in theopen, she

couldn’t understand. Anxiety and the senseof doom turned to outright panic, and she was

about toscream when the dark man touched her forehead withthe tip of his curved staff. As it

touched her skin, sheheard a low hum within her mind. Images of running ina pack, of being

free of a society that made suchdemands upon her for behavior and thought. She

wasbombarded by images of independence. “Calm,” the man said, his voice resonant

andcommanding. She obeyed, her hammering heartslowed almost instantly, and the fear

dissipated asquickly. She would follow any command he gave her. Inhis presence she felt

safe and confident. “I am Marcus,”he said. “You will be safe with me.” She already knewthat.

Looking up into the depth of his eyes, she knewshe would have nothing more to fear.“You

were following me?” she asked.“We were not the only ones, but those agents will nolonger

be a concern to you, or anyone else for thatmatter.” She knew it was true. With him leading

her, shewas secure that nothing would be a concern for her.With him, she felt free of society

and had a strange newsensation to abandon everything she knew of her role

as a mechanic. She never fit in, anyway, she thought.Never wanted to belong. She had

always sought to befree. She wanted to run. She wanted to run with Marcusand the girl that

had been a cat. She wanted to hunt. Astrange noise escaped from deep within her throat.

Wasshe purring?Marcus smiled down upon her. “The strength you feelcomes from the

primal power unlocked from within. Itwill dissipate shortly.” He touched her again with the

tipof his shillelagh. Even more commandingly he said, “Youwill remember the strength you

feel.” She would neverforget. She didn’t need him to command it.“Where are we going?” she

asked. It didn’t really matter.She’d follow him anywhere.“Into hell, most likely,” he said. He

smiled. The dangerhe anticipated intoxicated him, and she felt it, too.“Why have you chosen

me?” “You have a primal skill I need. One that I want, and havesought my whole life. I will

study you. In the hunt.” RRRThe Governor General stood against the railing alongthe

balcony adjoining his private study. A crew was busywithin, repairing the damage caused by

the recentquake, the epicenter of which seemed directly belowthe mansion. Repairing it

again. Of course, the crew wasdifferent than the last repair crew that had worked onhis

study. Strange happenings seemed to befall any crewthat worked within the mansion. The

Governor, himself,assured this crew that he would assign his personalguard to them once

their work was complete, to escortthem to their next assignment. When asked about

theirnext assignment, however, he merely responded thatthe details were still being worked

out.Various Guild investigators stood behind him, ready toreport their findings as he

commanded. His secretary,Lucius, remained in the shadow to his right.Orville Weaver

began. “As we suspected, Sir, the volcanicactivity did more than shake and batter the city.

Therelease of different chemicals and compounds haspoisoned what water might be found

in the numerouswells, and the saturation of heat in the soil seems tohave quickly dried up

the otherwise plentiful runningwater sources coming into the City from out of

themountains.”“The volcanic drought extends to the mountains?” theGovernor

inquired.“Nearly. But the recent sub-zero temperatures have thewater there frozen too

deeply to melt even at the baseof the mountains.”He thought on it for a moment, staring

south upon hisCity. “Mister Clemm,” he commanded. “What are yourfindings on the

livestock?”Investigator Clemm was considerably meeker thanWeaver, and he shook far too

visibly in the presence ofboth Lucius Matheson and the Governor General. Eventhe other

investigators made him uncomfortable. Heregretted accepting the position as a field agent,

not forthe first time. He also wondered how he had beenassigned the task of investigating

the strangeoccurrences that had befallen the numerous ranchesoutlying the city. He

mustered what courage he could.Speaking quickly to get it over with as soon as possiblehe

said in a squeaky voice, “As Mister Mathesonpredicted, some ailment has befallen the

non-indigenous animal stock brought here from Earthside.They’ve gone feral. Animals long

domesticated and longunthreatening have developed a strange thirst forblood.” He thought

he was finished. He thought thatwould be enough.The Governor General said, “Go

on.”Roger Clemm swallowed hard, and the sound carried tothem all. “They attack anything

in sight. They kick,scratch, bite anything moving. They refuse to eatanything save living

flesh.”“Has it spread to each of the ranches?”“Not yet. I predict it will have infected all of

them withinweeks. A month at the most.”“Cause?”“Unknown, Sir. Malifaux, I guess.” The

joke fell flat. Heregretted the attempt.Investigator Amelia Estremera spoke up, saving

theuncomfortable Clemm from any more scrutiny. “Thisdoes not bode well for the social

climate in Malifaux,”

she said. The Governor actually turned to face her,irritated that she spoke out of turn without

waiting forhim to address her. Still, he knew her intent and had allhe needed from Roger

Clemm as the man was clearlywithout any new information of any worth. In fact, heonly

offered what was already known and told to himbefore setting out on his investigation.“It’s

not your job to gauge the demeanor of the city’sinhabitants, Ms. Estremera,” he said archly.

“It’s mine.”“Sorry, Sir,” she said, suddenly timid.“Make your report,” he commanded.“The

plague continues to spread. It’s moved beyond theQuarantine Zone, beyond the slum district

as well.Although it’s not as potent as the initial outbreak inearly fall, there are no known

survivors that havecontracted the illness.”He turned to the final investigator. Gerald Stevens

said,“Several groups have formed various coalitions aroundthe City and have openly

engaged in rebelliousactivities.”“Known affiliations?”“None, Sir. None that have been

discovered, and Iinterrogated several rigorously. I believe they areindependently organized

groups raising an insurgenceto protest the decline of safety and living conditions.”“There will

be connections to the Arcanists. PossiblyResurrectionists as well. Continue probing.”“Of

course, Sir,” Stevens said, though he did not believehe would find any such connections.

“Part of therhetoric of several of these rebellious groups is toimmediately abandon their

homestead here inMalifaux. Hundreds have already done so. Given thecasualties of the

plague, the death toll of their ownviolent protests, and the fear of the rising drought

andfamine, we predict a sharp decline in the population.Save the initial criminals assigned

work duty here as wellas others refused travel visas, the growth of therebellious parties

seems to have infiltrated most walksof life. If conditions worsen as predicted--”The Governor

had heard enough and cut him off.“Matheson,” he barked irritably. “Close the Breach

totravel. Effective immediately. Limit the run to soulstoneshipment and essential goods

import.”“Immigration as well?” Lucius asked.“No need to add to the discontent. No travel.

Noimmigration. Double the Guardsmen’s watch duty. It’stime to declare martial law. No one

moves within thecity save essential duties your office will approve.”“It will require some time

to implement such drasticchanges.”“You have no time, Mr. Matheson. You’ll enact my

edictimmediately. Spare no time. No manpower. See that it’shandled.” Lucius nodded. He

would get it done. Henever failed. “You’re all dismissed,” he said, and turnedback to the city

in the valley below him. They each filedout with Lucius at the end. When they had gone he

smiled, and his grip upon therailing tightened. “Even better than planned,” hewhispered.

“Even better than planned.” Oneconstruction worker just beyond the open door thoughthe

heard the Governor chuckling.