November 28

Pandora was not herself. She couldn’t explain it, exactly, but knew something

was askew as she sat upright in her bed and heard her mother fussing beyond her

bedroom door, working in the kitchen, preparing a breakfast of semolina. The air was heavy

with the smoke from the night’s coal fires, but the rising sun cut feebly through the veil. It

was a weak winter sun that was ineffective against the morning chill which clung stubbornly to

the shadows and within the cracks of the cobblestones. She yawned, stretched, and pulled

the quilted nightcloak about her shoulders, trying to keep warm. The thought that June should

have brought with it a warm morning to greet her was dismissed as nonsense. Every day was

winter. “Mother?” Pandora called as she left her room. No one was there to greet her, but a

fire still burned in the potbelly at the center of the house, and embers glowed with dark orange

flickers from the hearth in the main room. “Mother?” she called more loudly. Her bowl

was upon the table, in its usual place, but there was nothing within it. Their home was small,

and she quickly checked every room. There was no sign of her mother anywhere. Pandora

was old enough to fend for herself, but the feeling of isolation fell upon her stronger than she

could have imagined, and the anxiety was stupefying. She’s gone to find some food. Some

water, she said to herself. She’ll return shortly. Still, the feeling of abandonment was strong

and filled her with a sense of dread. She sought to rid herself of such nonsensical feelings

as she thought her mother might – by busying herself and working the time away until she

would return. So, she grabbed a burgundy shawl and wrapped it over her shoulders and

head, slipped her cold feet into a pair of slippers, and grabbed a bucket from the back stoop.

She stepped out into the brisk morning air and strode to the communal water pump in the

alley between buildings. It wasn’t the cold that caused her more discomfort, but the silence.

Only halfway to the pump did she realize that none of her neighbors were about, nor were

There people traveling on the street in front of their house. She dropped the bucket and,

despite her nightly attire, ran around the house to confirm her fear. The street was bare. The

people were gone. “No,” she said in a gasp as her lower lip quivered. “Mother!” she called,

needing that familiar and comforting presence to calm her and assure her that everything was

as it should be. It’s what we’ve always wanted, she thought. No more people. The place to

ourselves. “We have?” she asked aloud, answering her own inner voice. Of course. Think

about it. How we loathed them! “We did? I do not believe we did. Why would we?” Her inner

voice spoke but was interrupted by a crash behind their home that sounded like metal cans

being knocked aside. “Hello!” she called. “Anyone?” She wanted an answer and the silence

that greeted her was stifling. She shivered, but not from the cold. The fear of isolation felt

heavy within her and she felt she was being watched, which paradoxically compounded her

fear. It was irrational, she thought, that she was growing so desperate to see someone else

there, to assure herself that she was not alone, but the thought that someone was watching

her made her even more uncomfortable. She looked around at the adjoining buildings,

spinning madly, faster and faster, looking at each for a familiar face. The opaque blackness of

each window was all she could see. The voice in her mind was so quiet and muffled, as if

faraway, but she heard it say, Who? “The people here,” she said around a cry. “The

people!” Quieter, still, and far away, the voice said, Who? It wanted a name, she realized. She

thought to say their names, to appease her inner fear, but when she began to speak the

names of her neighbors, nothing came to her. At the door of a neighbor’s house, she shook

the handle, but it was locked. She pulled herself up to look through

the front window, but the interior was so dark that she could see nothing but shadows. After

she had dropped back to the ground below did she realize that the other windows, clearly

visible from the outside of the house, offered no light into it when she looked through that front

window. Her stomach growled and her lips were cracked. Her fingers and toes were numb in

the frigid air. Still, she pulled herself back to look into that window, more intently examining

the inner space. Deep shadows were all she could see. The dim gray light of the morning

could not penetrate the darkness on the other side of that window, and her reflection was the

only thing visible. Against the darkness, her own image was too strong to make out any of the

furniture or other contents of the home. If there were no people, perhaps they would, at the

least, have a small store of food or water and that would be a treasure, indeed, in these

difficult times where both were in such short supply. She moved to her left, trying to find a

better angle where her reflection wouldn’t block her view, and thinking that if she looked at a

more oblique angle into the room instead of through her reflection, she might better see

something there in. But her reflection didn’t follow her as she moved. When it cocked its head,

a movement she didn’t make, and seemed to look at her inquisitively, she yelped and fell to

the ground below, landing full on her backside. She screamed as her own dim

reflection remained there in the window, looking down on her before pulling away and turning

to walk into the darkness of the house. She couldn’t help herself as the terror mounted and

she ran to the back of her home and in through the backdoor. She slammed the door and

bolted the lock and then fell to the cold worn planks, crying inconsolably. Reaching out to a

nearby rug, she pulled it over herself, hiding her face within its dusty folds, rolling herself

into a ball. Only a few minutes passed that way, but in her fear, it seemed like forever. Against

the wall beyond the potbelly stove rested the small axe they used to chop the timber for their

fires. She snatched it up and was hacking at the front door of the next door neighbors whom

she could not remember. The head barely sank into the wood as she struck, for it was heavy

and thick and she was weak. But each strike brought with it more anger and determination.

The strange darkness beyond, and her living reflection horrified her, but she needed to

Know what was within. An hour or more passed before she had a splintered hole, narrow and

ragged, cut into its face. She dropped the axe beside her to thrust her bare arm through

the small hole she had carved, cutting herself as her arm and hand scraped against the

jagged wood. She groped for the handle, and if she thought the cold outside was severe, the

strange feeling that struck her lacerated arm made her think all the heat within her was being

drawn out. When the door swung inward, the light behind her could only penetrate the

shadows several feet in. She was ready for that, however, having grabbed a kerosene lamp

kept over the mantle before leaving her house. She lit it quickly, and its light, too, could barely

penetrate the ashen gray darkness. She stepped into the house, disturbed that she could only

see a few feet before her but determined to continue. She followed the edge of the rug,

deep burgundy and gold, she guessed, though it was like looking through a fog in the depth of

night, even though it was literally right at her feet. The wall nearest her was just beyond her

reach, but it was even more lost in the shadows and she could barely make out the darker

lines of the wainscoting and ornate frame of a picture above it upon pale wallpaper with

elaborate filigreed columns. When she had taken several more steps and the faint outline of

another frame , seemingly identical in size and shape to the first, came into her view, she

turned, holding her lamp outstretched to examine the first she had passed, but the wall was

barren save the faint swirls of the floral print of the wallpaper. The light of the door was faint

and far away, just a pinhole, even though she had taken only several steps into the room. She

couldn’t help herself. Going no further in that wretchedly cold room, Pandora ran as fast as

she could toward the pinhole of light that was the door, so far away. She ran and she ran but

could get no closer to it, even though, by her reckoning, it should have been only six feet

away, at the most. Running gained her no ground toward the door, and as she came to a

stop, the small doorway in the great distance slowly narrowed, as if the door might be

swinging shut, but it continued to shine, as a beacon behind her. The floor, she found, was

the same – wooden planks with that thick rug upon it. The walls, too, were marked with the

vertical lines of the wainscoting. Turning to resume her trek, the frame of the picture

loomed before her, exactly where it was before she had run from it.

She walked as if carrying a great weight, step after step,but it did not seem to get any further

into the house.She wished to weep again but had no energy, and thedehydration left her

tearless. Crying was the only thingthat made sense to her.She walked past the picture and

tried to examine theimage upon it, but the face upon the canvas was amuddy, indistinct

shape, like a shadow within a shadow.She continued on, following the line of the carpet,

afraidto deviate from the path. As the picture framedisappeared in the darkness behind her,

another cameinto view immediately before her. As she feared, it wasthe same indistinct

shape of a person without form,identical to the last. She intended to pull the picturefrom the

wall and nearly set her lamp down but thoughtbetter of releasing the light and held it firmly

as shepulled the large framed painting from the wall. It fell,and she hurled it into the room

toward the oppositewall. Knowing the outside dimensions of the house, sheknew the wall

should be only eight feet away at the veryfurthest. The frame neither struck the wall, nor

madeany noise at all if it fell to the floor. It was simplyconsumed silently by the gray

darkness.Turning to resume her trek, as that was the onlyrecourse, the picture was there

ahead of her again.She collapsed against the wall, holding her headperfectly still at the exact

space between thosedamnable pictures. The one behind her was just gone,and the one

before was not yet in sight. A movementone way or the other would return a frame into

vagueperception.The wall was there as it should have been, but the lightfrom that faraway

door now loomed ahead of her, in astrange reversal. She turned back, and the dim gray

wasall that was there, but the wall was on her left now. Itwas a minor change but disoriented

her greatly. Shetook a step forward, in the same direction she had beengoing with the wall

on her right and carpet on her left,now toward the light. She hesitated. It was a trick. Hereyes

could not be trusted. Not in that place.Turning, Pandora walked away from the light and

intothe depth of darkness. “Hello?” she called loudly, andher voice echoed back as if she

were in a great cave. Shecalled out again and again until she realized somethingwas off.

Where she called “hello?” with an inflection ofa question, the echoed voice was more of

anacknowledging statement. “Hello?” she called again,over-emphasizing the upward lilt at

the end. In equalemphasis, her echo was a firm statement, different thanher own. She tried it

again with the same result. Butwhen she tried it with eyes open, the echo was thesame

fading tone as her own intonation.She realized that nothing was as it seemed. Reality

hadlittle meaning, and her eyes were the least to be trusted.Eyes closed, then, she reached

out her hand. It struckthe solid surface of the painting that had showed upover and over. She

looked at it now, with her fingerstouching the edge of the frame. Strangely, the small lightin

the distance was now behind her, although she facedthe wall and the painting directly, as if it

were all inreflection.She leaned closer to examine the painting, holding herlamp close to her

face and its surface. The imagethereupon was indistinct and amorphous – just a blobof

shape in the center. “It’s Mother,” she said,recognizing the figure there although it was so

indistinct.“But that’s not right. How could it be? There’s no sensein that. This isn’t even our

home.” The gray void pulsedin that low rumbling growl. The thought of her motherirritated

her for some reason. She leaned close to thepicture again. She came to recognize the

familiar colorsof her own hair, flesh, and burgundy around the lowermass of colors that

resembled the burgundy shawlwrapped over her shoulders. She gasped and steppedback.

The image, indistinct though it seemed, was ofher.The void behind her growled again. She

had no meansof defending herself against whatever might be outthere.She returned to the

image, more anxious anddetermined. “It’s a mirror,” she said. Using her sleeve,she rubbed

vigorously at the thick grime coating it,making it difficult to see. Sure enough, the oily

coatingslowly rubbed away to reveal her own reflection, smilingin faint triumph at the

discovery.As she turned her head and shifted in place, examiningthe mirror, she could not

help but jump, shrieking brieflyas something moved in the dark depth behind herreflection.

She spun, assuming it was behind her, butthe void was undisturbed. Pandora turned back to

themirror and jumped again. She stood off-center, slightlyto the left of the mirror. Her

reflection stared back ather, but at an angle from her right.

She couldn’t take much more of the torment and sankto her knees.It’s a game,she said to

herself.Heart beating and exhausted from the emotionaltrauma, she didn’t even know what

that statementmeant. “What game?” she asked.Figure it out.The thought of her Mother

embracing her entered hermind. It might have been a comforting thought ofprotection.

Instead, it made her feel helpless andimpotent needing to rely upon another. That was

thekey, she suddenly realized: the image of her mother inher mind was as vague and

formless as the smudgedreflection of the mirror.She stood, staring at her reflection. “There is

noMother,” she said resolutely. “It’s a lie. I am alone.” Shehad no fear of that isolation but

took pride in it. Sheclosed her eyes, fingers reaching out to touch thesurface of the mirror.

She thought of it breaking. Shecould not run from the mirror, and she could not discardit into

the surrounding void, either. But as she focusedupon the mirror shattering, thinking of the

shards ofglass in her mind with clarity, the mirror split in a fracturedown the center. She

opened her eyes, though sheregarded her reflection with a fierce and angryexpression. She

was on one side of the crack in themirror, her reflection on the other. “It’s not real,” shesaid.

“This is all a lie.” She stared at herself in the mirrorthat began to tremble, vibrating on the

wall. “Iam notreal. It is a dream.”The mirror shattered, sending shards of glass flyingthrough

the air. As the first jagged piece struck her arm,her flesh shattered, too, as if she were the

mirror. Herarm, torso, all of her fractured just as the vague imagesof the rug and wall broke.

The pieces flew off to beconsumed by the gray void.Pandora, the reflection, stood with her

armoutstretched, touching the epicenter of the broken glasswhere her other self had just

been. Her reflection hadcarried the kerosene lamp in the right hand, but it nowheld the

arcane box that contained her sorrows. Sheremembered most of the experience that led her

intothat abandoned house in Malifaux, with a winter thatlingered into June, but smaller

details were alreadydissipating, as dreams typically do.A heavy footfall behind her made her

jump as it struckthe ground like a great hammer upon stone. She spun toface a towering

creature that came out of the foggydarkness that surrounded her. The Beast towered

overher, standing at least eight feet tall with its head hungdown below its bulky shoulders.

Although its deeply-muscled arms and torso were similar to that of a giantman, snapping

jaws with dagger-like teeth were insetwithin its torso, chomping at the flesh of its arm as

itleaned forward. Its head was a stretched and fur-coveredparody of some goat-like animal.

Long and conical,almost rabbit-like, ears hung back and down around itsneck just behind

two thick horns that curved downtoward its jaw. Its eyes were extremely large, even for

itsalready massive skull, and completely black, but small,pinprick dots sparkled within like

the reflection of a nightsky. Its snout was long, wide, and bony with short-bristledgray hair,

but its thin black lips were pulled up and back,exposing its quickly chattering teeth, every

one of themlong, wide, and flat. It stepped forward again, into thebrightness of the circle of

light in which Pandora stood,and its leg was powerfully thick. Its thigh alone took asmuch

space as three of the girls, and it bent back at theknee and then came down again, like the

hind leg of amighty stallion. Its large-hoofed foot struck down into thecarved slate ground

with a crack, and it snorted throughflared nostrils. This was the great and ancient

creaturethat had many names, but she knew him as Nytmare. Hisappearance had changed

since last she had seen him,now more fur covered and less plated with bony armor.He was

always different, forever changing, like thehorrible dreams he brought.She should fear him,

as almost all things did, but sheunderstood him better than most and stepped towardhim

unafraid. “I came looking for you. I thought I’d catchyou, but it was I who was caught. How

did you do that?”She should be furious with him for tormenting her withinthe nightmare.

Instead, she was impressed, perhapsenvious of the power he possessed over one so

strongas her.It chattered, clicking noises in its throat or clacking itslarge teeth in a kind of

speech that she didn’t at firstunderstand. It spoke again, and she began to understandas

images formed in her mind that seemed quite clearlynot hers. She understood it to say, ‘I did

nothing.’“The dream was mine? Yes, the dream is always thedreamer’s. But you manipulate

it. Twist it. For the fear itinstills. Thoughts of a mother? That’s how I broke yourillusion.”

He chattered and clicked and she understood him to say,‘Are you sure that’s part of my

twisting? Did you thinkof her tormenting you or bringing you comfort?’The anxiety returned

as he spoke of such things. “Iloathe them,” she said firmly.‘Of course.’ His foot struck the

large slate slab uponwhich they now stood as he stepped toward her.‘Don’twe all loathe

them?’But the images he conveyed had ahint of mockery, as if to suggest that they did not

loathethe humans but somehow envied them. She dismissedit as further torment.

Tormenting her with thoughts ofthem. However, she was once again impressed by hisability

to twist a person’s fears against them as she wasso many years before when she had first

discovered thedepth of her abilities and how similar she and the Beastwere.But she was no

longer young and lacking a will of herown. “We need your assistance,” she said

ascommandingly as possible. He stood further upright,stretching tall above her. “There’s no

more time for usto follow our own agendas.”He snorted, his breath washing down upon her

warmand foul. ‘You have put aside your own agendaPandora?’It was odd how he

accentuated the firstsyllable of her name. ‘You think you can hide yourthoughts from me?

Here, in this place?’ The box at herside struck a high, long chord of sound as if respondingto

him. When it finally dissipated, the Beast leanedforward to regard her more closely. ‘You

serve theirneeds? Lilith and the hag? The Box? Do you hear it, yet?Do you hear it speaking

to you Pandora? Do you knowwhich is the master, you or the Box?’She did not hear it

speak, as he suggested, and thoughtit was another of his tricks to sow confusion and

doubt.Her box was a tool, and she controlled it, she thoughtfirmly. “What about you? Who do

you serve? The boy?”‘My servitude is to a higher need. As is yours.’ Hecontinued to look at

the dark box held at her side, whichperplexed and agitated her. True that it

possessedstrange abilities that augmented her own, but she foundit strange that he might

suggest it was more.She sought to refocus the discussion. In this dream-world, he was too

strong, too manipulative, evenagainst one such as her. “We’ve come to you for help.Our

need is dire. We must stop the Tyrant Entities as ourancestors once sought to do. Where

they failed, wemust succeed.”‘Stop?’“We must end them. Finally. They stir again,

gatheringtheir strength and their form. They once again interferewith the tangible world.

December is known and nearlyrose again during the Event. Zoraida thought he mighthave

been killed by the Otherworlder. The girl with theMasamune. Its power was foretold to

disrupt theconnection they have between the aether realm andour own.”‘Killed? There is no

killed. Not of a Tyrant.’Then how can they be stopped? They mean to ascend.It will destroy

us. It will destroy everything.”‘That has always been the intent of a Tyrant. Theycannot be

stopped. But they draw power from theaether as ones such as you and some of the

humans.They may channel their power as you do through atotem linked to your will. As they

exist more in thatworld, they need a vessel of this world.’“Like you and the boy?” Nytmare

stood abruptly,genuinely surprised at the reference. Pandora said, “Areyoua Tyrant?” He

was clearly taken aback, having neverconsidered such a thing.The Beast paused and looked

down upon her from highabove. Its teeth gnashed audibly and she felt it was bothvehement

and proud. It looked back to the box whichhummed now with a resonating chord as though

froma single long string on a harp. The Beast said, ‘I amNytmare. I am Agreus. I am Nomios.

I am Phobos. I amDivergence. I am Ahriman and Angra Mainyu. I am Nihil.I am the Light

upon the Dark.’Reciting his many names made little sense to her,though he spoke as if it

were the appropriate answer toher question. “You said we serve a higher purpose. If

wecannot kill a Tyrant, what of the vessel? The girlDecember has chosen. If she is killed, will

He--”‘He would choose another.’“But the Cage has fallen. It has torn through the

fabricbetween this world and the aether. Released greatpower. They gather it, growing too

quickly. How can westop them if they rise again, like December, like Plague?

Now the Tyrant Cherufe is free from the prison. Whomight stop It if It chooses a vessel?”His

great head drew close to hers. ‘It has already chosen.It chose a vessel while still imprisoned.

One of the firstto cross through the Breach. But we can use the powerflooding this world,

too,’he chattered. A great nailprotruding from his forefinger struck the box, nearlyknocking it

from her. ‘To trap them. To keep them fromthe physical.’She jerked the box away from his

striking finger,scowling at him. “It is not one of them,” she said. Hehuffed several times, each

in quick snorts. It may havebeen laughter. Did he know something, or was this moreof his

trickery?She looked down upon it, cradled against her hip. Faintdiaphanous tendrils escaped

from the closed lid, snakingaround her waist and down her leg in gossamer arms ofgreen,

blue, and purple. But they were faint, and shecould not feel them. “What is it?” she asked

him of thebox.The box struck a higher, longer chord. As the lingeringsound slowly dissipated

he said more uncertainly, ‘It isof all. Material. Spiritual. Ethereal. Astral. It breachedthe

barrier between. It is Pandimensional. It isPanthereal. It is Pandemonium.’ The vaporous

tendrilsflared with more intense color as the Beast intonatedthe last three strange words. A

sharp pulse of soundemanated from within it, trembling now in her hands.The sound was so

high that it caused her to wince.When she opened her eyes, the gray void was gone, andshe

stood in the middle of the room that she inhabitedwithin the heart of Malifaux. She looked out

the window, and it was cold, with froston the ground, as it was in her dream. Her heart

beatwith the lingering anxiety of that nightmare, but sheknew it was November. Still, as she

left the room, herheart quickened yet again, so afraid was she that shedid have a mother

and that woman would be waitingfor her. As her hand turned the cold knob of the

door,releasing it from the latch, she told herself that it was avile thought. Still, she had the

lingering hope that anaging woman might be there.