December 2Joss looked up the side of the mountain, now fullyvertical as he neared the last

stage of his ascension. Hewas buried to his waist in heavy snow, just looseenough that it

could not support his great bulk. If therewas a trail still beneath his feet, he could surely

nolonger tell.He loosened the heavy leather anorak enough to reachbehind him and dialed

up the energy level of thedynamic generator mounted to his back, fumbling fora minute to

feel the correct knob beneath the heavymitten he refused to remove. A blast of wind bit

intohim, drawing the remainder of the heat from his chestat once, and he cursed, quickly

refastening the buttonsto tighten the coat again, to rebuild whatever heat thegenerator might

create. He was afraid it would catchthe heavy coat on fire, but he had the same fear

theprevious three times he had overpowered it. As he hadvowed each of those times, he

was sure this had to bethe very last time he throttled up the power. It broughtlittle additional

warmth, anyway. Maybe if he caughton fire it might actually help, he wondered, ponderingif

flame could freeze.His mountain guide had convinced him to take thislonger trek that wound

further back and forth acrossthe mountain’s face because it was much easier totraverse. For

the first leg of their expedition, three daysearlier, he may have been right as the group

walkedvirtually unimpeded across rocky but manageabletrails. They had camped without

incident upon a flatlanding where even the two pack mules showed nodiscomfort, and the

extra men he had brought to testtheir mettle remained in good spirit, dismissing therumors of

the mountain’s sinister brutality from thecomfort of the campfire while they downed bitter

buthot coffee. They remained in good spirit despite thecold rolling down upon them, and the

coffee gave wayto long draws on icy flasks of whisky, which they weresure still warmed their

bones. They had slept restfullybeneath thick flannel, convinced that those rumors ofthe

mountain were exaggerated tales told by others tosound tough in the taverns of Malifaux. Or,

as they nowlaughed, were told by men weaker than them, whichmade Joss’ men sound

tough and brave, too. He, alone,remained silent and aloof, knowing better than theothers

that their expedition would not remain asuneventful.It was the next day, while hiking and

continuing the jokeat the expense of those previous mountaineers, clearlyweaker than them,

that they pressed into a tangible wallof cold that chilled them instantly, freezing their fleshand

spirits. Their guide, a grizzled and robust manhimself, caused the sense of panic to mount

as hestepped through the physical barrier, grew wide-eyedand quickly stepped backward,

out of the cold,hesitating. He pressed his hand against it, moving itthrough the wall.

“Dropped twenty-five, thirty degrees,”he muttered. “T’ain’t nat’ral,” he said, his voice a

coarsewhisper against the wind that cut through their anorakslike knives.It was the first time

Joss had dialed up the dynamicgenerator beneath his coat. He had looked down uponthe

men hesitating on the path, the wind carrying thinflakes of snow before them as an ominous

portent ofwhat was to come. Joss adjusted his goggles, tighteningthem against his face, and

turned silently from the menand pressed on. They looked from one to the other, eachunsure

of what to do, but no man intended todisappoint the bulky northwestern tribesmansteadfastly

striding above them.The cold and wind had sapped their will, leaving thelighthearted joviality

of the previous night a vague andmocking memory. They silently followed one after theother,

eyes downcast upon the tread of Joss’ bootsimprinted in the thickening snow. The last thing

they hadsaid to one another was a brief discussion about “TheCold Heart of the Mountains,”

which became the nameof that particular mountain for many years to come,although no one

was ever sure any one member of thatexpedition survived this trek. Still, rumor of the

ColdHeart spread to every man, woman, and child inMalifaux.The lead man, ominously

named “Mister Graves”,stopped abruptly, and they followed his gaze up the trailto see Joss

momentarily double over, bracing againstanother blast of wind. They could see it strike him,

coldand gray. It was the second time Joss throttled up the

dynamic generator, although his hand was a sickly paleblue as he withdrew it from his coat,

struggling to putthe thick lined mitten back upon it. Graves, too,determined to prove his

worth, steeled himself againstthe raging elements and strode forward. His chokedscream

reached Joss who turned to see him topple,frozen like a man carved from stone.The others

withdrew, but a mule and one moreMountaineer perished before they could retreat toslightly

more favorable conditions. Only the hired guidecould continue with Joss and that because of

the extracoat he managed to pull from Graves. The last words hesaid to Joss was, “They’ll

never make it back!” above thegale. They had forged on in silence, struggling throughdrifts

and slipping on ice that was all but invisiblebeneath a layer of snow, fighting the wind that

seemedto blow directly upon them.By mid-day, Joss had to admit that he could no longertell

if they were still on the trail that had graduallynarrowed as they ascended, and he labored

over morefrequent and larger stones that blocked the way. Heturned to the guide for

reassurance, but he was notthere. Joss could not be sure when he lost the man, orwhether

he had fled in judicious retreat, fallen from theedge of their path, or merely froze to his death.

Josscouldn’t have heard him above the ferocious howling ofthe wind, even if the guide had

screamed for helpdirectly beside him.Joss had continued, of course, climbing despite the

lackof sensation in his hands and feet; most of his body, infact. Now, however, Joss had

come to a true impasse.He no longer doubted that he had been forced off thetrail, and he

traversed the mountainside as best hecould, but the way before him was blocked by

severalgreat rocks, each consumed by jagged vertical pillars ofice. Looking up, he knew his

destination was onlyperhaps a hundred feet above him. It was not the apexof the mountain,

for the peak was vaguely visiblethrough the blinding blizzard beyond the ledge hesought. But

above the mountain he could see the thickroiling black clouds swirling in a great circle for

manymiles, like a hurricane held in place. The eye of thatraging storm was a gaping hole of

absolute blackness,clearly visible even through the snow. That black spotloomed directly

above the ledge, not the mountainpeak, and arms of lightning occasionally flashed fromthe

dark center of the circling cloud to strike that flatledge of his destination. He could not hear

its thunderabove the wind but could feel it vibrate through him lessthan a second after the

brilliant flash of light illuminatedthe rocks and ice around him.Joss was a man that rarely felt

fear, but not for the firsttime on the arduous climb did he reluctantly admit tohimself that he

truly doubted he would ever leave italive.He shook out his hands, ineffectually trying to get

somefeeling back into them. He pulled the twin axes from hisback, the static electricity

snapping about the intricatelyengraved blades as the energy from the dynamicgenerator

powered them through the thick cables thatextended beneath his anorak to the ends of the

metalshafts. He doubted his ability to climb the absolutevertical surface but knew he could

not continue windinghis way back and forth looking for whatever might beleft of a trail, even

if he did cut through the rocks andpillars of ice before him.He had little strength remaining,

but the electricallycharged heads sheared through the rock with fortunateease. He pulled

himself up and sank the second axe intothe rock, and he climbed, painfully and with

eachmuscle stinging in protest. He pulled himself up, the axeslike claws, dragging himself

along the mountainside. Hethought he could go no further and looked down torealize he

hadn’t even traversed half the distance to theledge above. Dropping would kill him. He

pressed on,and the wind impossibly intensified as he drew to thefinal stretch of the wall,

driving against him like a steamengine. He could barely hold on, let alone complete theclimb.

Somehow, the great barrier of wind gave for amoment, releasing him, and he propelled

himselfupward, grasped the edge, and pulled himself from therocky face, his axes dangling

behind him by their powercords. The wind and snow raged on, just beyond theledge,

battering the axes against the cliff but barely blewagainst him as he rolled to his back, face

toward theominous black eye directly above.He blinked twice, and when he closed his eyes

against abolt of lightning that lit the sky above him, hesuccumbed to the exhaustion and

passed out.tttHe had no way of knowing how long he might havebeen unconscious because

the sun was blocked bythose swirling clouds.

A pair of hands was upon him, pulling him upright,pouring a warm fluid into his mouth. His

vision wasblurred, and he could not taste it, only vaguely felt thehot liquid dribble down his

chin.The image of a young man’s face was before him, blurryand pulling away as he slipped

back intounconsciousness. “Rasputina,” Joss said. “Must get toRasputina.”The boy’s eyes

grew wide, and he looked quickly fromthe left to his right. “Shh!” he commanded. In a

hoarsewhisper he said, “Do not speak!”Joss was out again.tttHe awoke next as if from a

Sunday afternoon nap in thewarm orange glow of a fire burning low in the alcovebeyond the

foot of his bed. The narrow apartment wassparse but warm, and his covers were drawn

merely tohis waist, leaving his bare torso exposed butcomfortable. He was propped to his

side because of thegenerator mounted to his back. He could feel none ofthe familiar tingling

of added power injected into hisnervous system, however, and knew at once that it hadbeen

powered down completely. After a quick check heconfirmed that the acolytes had even tried

to removeit. Fools were lucky it didn’t kill him. Or that they didn’taccidentally discharge it and

kill themselves. His axes,however, were disconnected, and their removal causedhim to sit

upright in a panic. They leaned against thewall, neither damaged nor tampered with.He had

never been there but knew he was in the heartof the mountain within one of many rooms

built toaccommodate those who strangely worshipped theancient December as a god.The

acolytes practiced their own esoteric magics andhad fallen against the judgment of the

Guild, theirabilities something lost between the elemental and themore macabre views the

Resurrectionists held regardinglife. Ramos had befriended them quickly, of course,finding an

ally in the acolytes who shared his Arcanistprinciples regarding the freedom to explore their

ownpowers and abilities.The storm he had traversed could not have been thepriestess,

Rasputina’s, doing, nor could it have beennatural. Rumors of December’s death at Kythera,

then,were another exaggeration, as Ramos had suspected.The colossal cloud above the

temple and the powerfulcold and wind he had gone through demonstrated thepower of the

Tyrant, still gathering. Joss had all theinformation he wanted and would happily descend

todeliver his findings to Ramos as he had been charged.He needed supplies and a quick

conversation withRasputina to deliver the boss’s message, and he woulddepart from the

quiet subterranean temple ofDecember’s acolytes.Fully dressed and his axes reconnected

and held to thedynamic generator magnetically, he set out to find her,not at all predicting that

his ordeal on Cold Heart wasabout to become remarkably more difficult.Exiting into the dimly

lit corridors beyond his room, hewas met by a small man in layered icy-blue robes

whoseupper face was enshrouded by the cowl that fell overhis eyes. He approached from

the hall extending to theright. No natural light could reach them, but lanternshung at intervals

along the walls casting a red glow uponplastered walls that made the hall and

chamberstemporarily dispel the reality they were in cavernscarved into a mountain.As the

acolyte neared him, Joss said, “I need to seeRasputina.” The acolyte’s eyes grew wide

beneath hishood, reflecting strangely crimson in the light. Jossrealized the light was

unnatural, a luminous rock placedwithin the lantern’s chamber. “It is urgent,” he said, andthe

acolyte jumped toward him with palms pressingforward unthreateningly.“Shh!” he motioned

emphatically. “You mustn’t speak!Not so loud!” His eyes darted back and

forthconspiratorially.“What’s this about?” Joss asked as quietly as he could.He was a man

that could not easily lower his voice. The acolyte winced. “Come,” was all he said, and this

nolouder than a breath as if compensating for Joss’volume.“I’ll need supplies, too,” he said

and the acolyte seemedto duck his head as he led the way before him.The shadow of

someone approaching from an adjoiningcorridor stretched into the hall before them, and

theacolyte first froze, motionlessly intent upon the shadow

of the person approaching. Presently, he jumped to thewall, his back pressed tight to it. He

motioned for Joss todo the same. Instead, he stood firm and reached for thehandles of the

axes upon his back. The acolyte grabbedhis arm to stop him, which would normally have

eliciteda somewhat unrestrained reaction. Something in thefearful urgency of the man’s

youthful face stayed hishand. Reluctantly, he, too, backed against the wall justas the figure

emerged from the hall into his view.Although dressed in ceremonial robes similar to

theacolyte, it could not hide the more curvaceous figure ofa woman who merely regarded the

two menemotionlessly. The acolyte stared at the opposite wall,remaining as motionless as

possible. She might havebeen beautiful, Joss thought, regarding the even graceof her

movement as she turned and walked towardthem. But her red hair was unkempt and oily,

and herflesh bore small scars from her neck and up her cheeknear her ears. As she drew

closer, he realized they werebite marks made in the familiar row of what must behuman

teeth. Her eyes conveyed her loathing of bothmen. She intended to pass, but Joss realized

he was simply toobroad to allow even her petite frame to easily get by inthe narrow corridor.

He pressed against the wall astightly as he could, but the dynamic generator on hisback

prevented it.She looked up at him, clearly with disdain andimpatience. He pushed her

shoulder so that he mighthelp her squeeze past, but his hand upon her elicited astartling

reaction. Her nails, sharp as claws, slashed hisforearm, and her cracked lips pulled away

from herteeth, and she hissed. Though seething, enraged that hemight put a hand upon her,

she managed to move pasthim.Even in the darkness he had seen the emptiness of

hermouth. She was still within earshot when he asked,“What happened to her tongue?” The

acolyte’sexpression was one mixed of fear and anger at thisstranger’s insolence. Joss was

not hired for his intellect,but he was shrewd and quick-witted. He quicklysuspected

something foul had befallen the womeninadvertently brought into the Cult of December’s

ranks.“Ignore it,” the acolyte said and motioned for Joss tofollow him.Something about the

passion that burned within the girl,so full of pain and anger, enraged Joss, though he

rarelyfelt emotionally attached to anyone’s problems, muchless a stranger’s. As they

traversed the narrow corridorsand up through the levels of the temple, he saw moreand

more women turning from his sight, hiding their ownfaces in the shadows, or quickly turning

down anothercorridor. When any one of them could look him in theface, it was with unbridled

hatred and defiance. All ofthem looked upon the young acolyte with seethinghatred although,

as they did with Joss, most simplyaverted their gaze and slinked away. He saw more

acolytes as they walked, all of them young,some of them whispering quietly to themselves in

a faintwhisper that never traveled beyond their own ears asthey bent close to one another. If

a female ever nearedthem, especially one standing tall, looking still strong andangry, they

snapped silent and often stood rigid againstthe walls to allow her to pass, looking more

terrified thanany of the other females slinking silently in the darkcorners of the complex.At

one such encounter, Joss had seen enough and pulledhis acolyte aside. He thought he had

understood the fearand anger of the girls – that they had endured somethinghorrible here

upon the side of the mountain. But themen’s attitude of fear and their own compulsion

forsilence made little sense to him. Without even trying tolower his voice Joss said, “What

happened here? Tellme.”“Be silent!” the young man said in a hoarse whisper.Joss was not

silent. He did not raise his voice but it stillresounded from the rock walls for all to hear. “What

didyou do to the girls?” Acolytes and Silent Ones stoppedand turned toward them. “Where

are the priests?”“You fool!” the acolyte accused. He backed away fromJoss, advancing

confidently and angrily toward him. “Ithas nothing to do with us! It’s December. The

prophecy.”“I’ve heard the prophecy,” he said.“Silent Ones,” he said nodding to a girl partially

obscuredby the deep shadows of protruding arches along the wall.“December needs a

voice. He must find the frozen heart,and through her He must incant the invocation.” It

wasgibberish to Joss. “A voice!” the acolyte said. “She musthave a voice. The girls must not

speak. Or Decembercould consume all. The frozen heart and a voice for Himto speak. We’re

trying to save the world.”

Something in the acolyte’s demeanor told Joss that hedidn’t fully believe it himself. That the

story was onlypartially true or that there was more left unsaid. Afemale peered around the

corner of another corridormeeting theirs, clearly meek; she cowered when hisgaze fell upon

her. She trembled when she looked backat him to see he still looked at her, and he knew

thesigns of a person frozen in fear. He had seen it in manyof his enemies. He looked back

over his shoulder andsaw the first girl he had seen in the corridors below,now clearly

following them, and she turned to regardhim, full of contempt but confused at his own

hostilitytoward the boy. Joss stepped close to the boy andactually tried to whisper. It still

carried over the stillness.“And the bite marks? The submission? The anger? Whatcaused

that? Those were part of a plan to thwartDecember?” It was an accusation. Joss

didn’tunderstand the fervent following of this Tyrant Entityby other humans, but he

understood how men inpower could use their power for all of the wrongreasons. Using

strength against the weak wassomething he had seen plenty of.A hand fell upon the thickly

flexing muscles of hisforearm. He turned to see the girl he had first witnessedwhen he had

left his room. Hostile and loathsome totouch him, she pulled her hand from his arm with a

lookof disgust at having to place her fingers upon his skin.The look of contempt she shot at

the acolyte wasworse. Looking back to Joss, she pointed at the youngman and shook her

head. She pointed up, through theceiling of the corridor and motioned something,clenching

her fists before her and pantomiming ragewith her teeth. “Not the boy,” he understood,

andnodded.The acolyte said, “The priests.” He looked away,ashamed and afraid once again.

“She means the priestsare to blame. Not us, the acolytes.” The boy slid alongthe wall, away,

looking considerably more afraid of theSilent One than of Joss, which perplexed him.She

pointed up, through the ceiling, again.Joss turned to the acolyte. “Take me up,”

hecommanded, though his voice was even. “Take me up.”He was sure it would get him out

of the temple’s livingquarters at the least, and would likely provide a meansfor his exit as

well. Following the unspoken commandof the Silent One, he suspected he’d get the answers

tohis question as well.They didn’t speak as they traversed the narrow corridorsof

December’s temple. Joss saw other young men,acolytes, as well as the girls, each averting

their eyesfrom him, but all as full of hostility or fear as the next.One girl even stared hatefully

at the boy, causing him togo rigid and silent, before noticing Joss. Once she did,her facial

features relaxed, and she quickly walked on,and the boy resumed his quiet stride as well.

Many ofthe women were more afraid than angry, cowering andtrembling at the sight of him.

What he did not see werethe older, more mature men that he was accustomedto seeing in

all the dealings Ramos had in the past. Theywere the supposed leaders of the faith, and

they werenoticeably absent.Joss said, “She blamed the priests. Where are they?”They boy

would not speak even after Joss repeated thequestion more menacingly. When he said,

“Maybe Ishould speak to these priests, myself,” the boy bowedhis head once more.He said

in a sad whisper, “I don’t think it will benecessary.”Joss was led through a series of

elevations andchambers of the temple. He saw elaborate and beautifuldecorations and

architectural brilliance in vastcavernous chambers, illuminated with many thousandsof the

luminescent crystals that reflected all light likemirrors, to fill each room with a rainbow of

colors. Otherrooms, whether spacious or small, were ascetic, void ofornamentation or

comfort, and often with just enoughlight to make out the area.Presently, the steps and walls

became rough, and morenatural. They came to the top of the stairs and the boyhalted at the

twin doors of heavy timber. “I’ll go nofurther,” he said to Joss. “She’s out there.” The

boytrembled, and his lower lip quivered.“Rasputina?” At the word, his eyes grew wide, and

hecould no longer stand there at the landing before thegreat doors. He stepped down, first

slowly, uncertain,and then nearly ran.Joss opened the great doors, striding confidently

intothe wide and rough-hewn cave that opened to the sideof the mountain at the far end,

glaring brightly thoughhe knew it was dark beneath the storm that raged. Hestrode to

Rasputina, angry enough at whatever tragedyhad befallen the women here at the hands of

the eldermen that he would help right those wrongs. But the

nostrils, and he heard her harsh and angry words,conveying her conflict, before he could see

her. Pillarsof ice rose from the floor, and frozen stalactites droppedfrom the ceiling, making

him feel as if he walked into themouth of December, Himself. Stepping around those

icyteeth, he was shocked by what he saw. Rasputina,unconcerned by the cold, wore only a

skirt, cut on oneleg nearly to her hip, leaving her legs bare above leatherboots. She had no

coat, and her arms were bare, palebut covered in blood from her hands to elbows. Thoseicy

teeth, he realized, were exactly that; before her wasa man, one of the cult’s elder priests that

Joss hadexpected to find in the temple. But he was held off theground by one of those

jagged ice spikes, pierced frombeneath, and another from above that cut downthrough his

shoulder, thick blood seeping from thelaceration and flowing across his body and

poolingbeneath him. The priest’s eyes were rolling up into hishead, and Joss knew he was

on the edge of death. Hehad seen this fight many times, as a man’s will diesmoments before

his body follows. He knew this manwould soon expire as his head lolled against the ice

thatheld him aloft.Standing there, between those icy teeth, he realizedthat other men, now

merely corpses, were frozen withinthem, sometimes above, sometimes near the ground.He

recoiled, more in surprise than at the visceral stateof the remains; each had large areas of

flesh and muscletorn away as if devoured by a creature before they couldbe fully frozen

within the ice.He gasped, looking at all of the corpses frozen into eachicy fang around

him.She turned, and he recoiled again, for dark bloodcovered her lower face and dripped

down the front ofher tight bodice and upon the skin of her shoulders andupper

chest.“Rasputina?” He was at a loss, and that was not acommon occurrence for a man

known for his ability topredict any horrible event and react to it evenly andquickly.“Ah,

Ramos’ right-hand man. What do they call you,again?”“Joss.” Her eyes were wild. She

smiled, and the macabregore around her mouth made the gesture horrible andsinister. He

had no coat, no supplies, but he looked tothe mouth of the cave, gathering his wits

andformulating a plan of escape should this encounter gobadly. So far, he began to

understand, there was no goodway the day was going to end.“Yes, Joss. Good of you to

visit. Where’s your boss?Frozen on the path up?” He said nothing. “No. Of coursenot. Cozy

down in his apartments in the city.Comfortable, isn’t he? No one aware of what he’s up toas

he plots and schemes and devours the Guild rightthere within them.”“Rasputina,” Joss

began, slowly and more gently thanhe had spoken to another person in many years.

“Whatare you doing here?” The robes of the priest before herhad been torn away from the

wound caused by thejutting spike from above, and a large patch of his fleshalong his ribs

was gone, removed to the bone. Killing thepriests might have been justified for the full extent

oftheir crimes, but she had crossed a line even he couldn’tunderstand.“Doing here?” she

asked, and her eyes gleamed. Shealmost laughed, but her expression was mocking. “I’min

education now, Joss. A school marm. Teachingwayward children.”“You’re killing them. The

priests.”“Oh, I don’t see it that way.” He wanted to saysomething, but could not. “They want

to know power,Joss. They really want to know power. They need toknow what it’s like to

have power. Something youalready know, don’t you?” Still he said nothing. “Whatbrings you

up here, Joss? Want to join the religion?” Shesneered, clearly angry at the notion of a

religion devotedto the worship of one she despised. “The initiationdoesn’t take that long.”

She tried to smile but it, too, wasfalse. He was cold and stoic, having very little

normalemotion, himself. Rasputina, however, was somethingdifferent. Almost devoid of any

human emotion, herealized. It made her considerably more dangerous thanlast he had seen

her. She had killed now and had gonefar beyond the first kills that left a normal person full

ofconfusion, doubt, and guilt. She could kill withouthesitation, without mercy, now.He thought

he might change the subject, to speak to hernormally so that it might ground her in

something real.“Ramos suspected the rumors of December’s death atKythera were false.

The miners that were lost are of noconsequence.”

“Miners? Is this about miners?” She grew angry. “Whilehe’s down there, living out his life in

comfort, designingan intricate plan for his future, I’m up here--” She cutherself off. At least

she had some emotion left.Unfortunately, it seemed that anger was the only thingshe could

still feel. She regained her composure, buryingthe anger beneath that inner sheath of

ice.“No,” Joss said. Of course Ramos had sent him here topartially chastise her for killing

those men, tools of hisorganization. However, Joss knew he’d need to changetactics with

her now, fully aware that something strangehad befallen Rasputina. “Not about any miners.

Ramosdoesn’t care about the miners. Only you. He wants youto come down to the city. He

can protect you.”“Protect? Me?” Her eyes were piercing daggers. “Me?”she spat. “Ramos

doesn’t know nearly as much as hethinks he does. He is another child stumbling

about,thinking the world revolves around him.” Something inwhat she said seemed to strike

a memory that causedher to pause, looking less angry, more regretful as shelooked past

him, almost longingly.“He’ll do what he can to help you,” Joss said. “And thewomen

here.”“Put us in one of his shows?” she asked absently. “Prettyshowgirls to be fawned

over?” Her voice was quiet. Josssuspected that once Rasputina likely longed to benormal.

Perhaps even a dancer as she now suggestedin sarcastic jest.Her eyes suddenly fastened

upon him, and her thinbrows drew down in renewed anger. Her lips, too, drewback in a

sneer, the blood around her mouth gleamingin the light from the mouth of the cave. “I have

amessage for you to deliver to your boss,” she said. “Youlet him know that I’m tired of

dealing with hismessenger. I want to talk to him. You tell him to comeup for a visit. You know

what? Let’s send him a messagehe’ll really understand, so that there’s no doubt aboutmy

sentiment.” Her arm whipped from her side in aflashing arc and a wind emanated from her

with suchviolent force that he was knocked from his feet andthrown against the far wall with

enough force to stunhim. Before he could fall to the floor, her other arm hadsnapped from

above to her side, and ice shot up fromthe floor of the cave and from his back, holding him

inplace, frozen to the wall. It had him by the torso, fromaround his neck all the way down to

his thighs, leavinghis limbs struggling futilely. She walked toward himcasually while he

struggled against the ice, pressingagainst it and striking it with his fists, all to no avail.“Ah,

Joss. Ramos’ right-hand man. You’d do anythingfor him, wouldn’t you? It’s not the money, I

bet. It’sbeing so close to all that power. Control. Isn’t thatright?” He continued to struggle.

She reached out tograb him around the wrist of his right arm. It was sofrigid that he lost all

sensation in the arm, and it wentlimp and numb. She pulled it out straight and placedhis

hand to the wall, freezing it in place, the armextended.“Rasputina,” he pleaded. “We want to

help! We wantto help you!”She left him hanging there for a moment, standingbefore him

emotionlessly. His arm was numb, but helooked on in horror as it turned blue, freezing

fromwithin as the biting chill of her touch solidified his bloodand tissues. Gathering his wits,

he renewed his struggleto free himself from the ice but knew it was in vain. Ofall the ways he

had imagined he would die, always atthe hands of another, this was far from anything

hecould have predicted. Never would he have imaginedhe might die without a fight, helpless

while hisadversary took her time.Minutes passed, though it stretched longer in his mindas

she stood before him, concentrating on the cold thatdevoured his arm. Joss had to focus for

his mind hadbegun to retreat from the reality of his impendingdeath.She was interrupted by

the mute groaning of a girlbeside her. Rasputina’s eyes fluttered open, glowingpale blue

before returning to normal.The girl wore tight black leather, strapped around herlegs by

narrow buckles. Like Rasputina, she wore onlya small bodice to cover her upper body,

leaving hershoulders and arms bare, but she, too, seemedoblivious to the cold. Still, she

fastened a long cape, justthe pelt remains of a fur-covered mountain creaturethat fell over

her shoulders and to the ground. Shemotioned to Joss and shook her head, but it was

moreof an appeal to Rasputina than a command. Turning sothat he could see her, he

recognized her long red hairand defiant expression as the girl he had firstencountered deep

within the heart of the temple,though she no longer wore the ceremonial robes.

“Mara!” Rasputina said with renewed anger at the girlthat stood between her and Joss.

“What do you thinkyou’re doing?”She pointed at him again and then toward the mouthof the

cave. She meant, “He should go.” Rasputinaregarded the girl who stood her ground and

shook herhead again. She pointed at him again, and then towardthe mouth of the cave. She

held his anorak in the otherhand at her side.“Is that right?” Rasputina said around a sneer.

“Sorry,Joss. But the message will still be delivered.” Her armshot forward again, and her

open palm slapped hisshoulder. Like a hammer striking ice, the shouldershattered, sending

shards that were recently his fleshflying about them. She waved her hand dismissively,

andthe ice holding him in place withered away in a second,dropping him to the cold rock

below.On his knees, he looked up at his arm, still frozen to thewall, and blood flowed freely

from his shoulder, a greattorrent resulting from the sudden severing of flesh.Rasputina was

upon him, lifting him by the back of hisshirt, stronger than he imagined she could be. When

hestruggled to his feet, his head swimming and dizzy, shereleased him and waved toward

the cave entrance. Thecold wind she commanded struck him again, and he wasthrown

bodily toward it and out of the cave, rolling onthe snowy ledge beneath the dark eye of the

stormonce more. He had no strength and could not hope tosurvive the mountain as he was,

wounded and exposed.His blood pooled beneath him, freezing quickly to hisside. “Do you

see now, Joss?” she questioned angrily,motioning to the clouds swirling above him. “Do

yousee? Tell Ramos that the storm is mounting! Tell himthat! You want to be like him, Joss!

Tell him you need anew right hand just like his. Tell him that if he sends his‘Right-hand man’

back as an errand boy, I’ll rip it rightoff! Tell him!” He struggled to his knees, confused

andunsure what he might do next, vaguely and instinctivelyfighting against the inevitable.

She kicked him in thestomach hard enough to throw him over the edge ofthe ledge where he

had climbed with his axes,exhausted. The wall of wind hit him, buffeting him against the

sideof the cliff, knocking him about as it propelled him tothe snow-covered rocks dozens of

feet below. Theblanket of snow softened his fall, but the jagged cliff hadfurther torn his flesh

and broken several of his bones,including a number of his ribs, making his breathingpainful

and laborious. The cold numbed him at once,and he knew it would race against his blood

loss to killhim. He suspected the cold would kill him first. He didn’tfight against it, knowing

that if the cold had its way, hewould drift off to sleep and die rather gently.The Silent One,

Mara, fell beside him, having leapt fromthe cliff above. She landed on her feet in a crouch,

herhair flowing from her fall and the wind that raged. Thefur hide billowed behind her, leaving

very littleprotection against the elements. She didn’t need it, herealized. He thought for a

moment she might havedescended upon him to finish him off. It would havebeen an act of

mercy. Instead, she pressed her handupon his chest, and he felt himself chill, freezing

fromthe inside rather than having the cold drain the heatfrom him. He briefly thought she was

freezing him asRasputina had his arm, but it brought no pain. In fact, itequalized his

temperature so that the pain of theexternal cold was tolerable, though he knew it was

coldenough to freeze a man in minutes. Concentrating, sheclosed her eyes, focusing her

power. As she meditatedhe felt his veins flowing with ice, so cold it felt like razorscoursing

within him. Rather than hurting, however, itbrought him some comfort and his shoulder, he

saw,cauterized, and he breathed more comfortably. Shecontinued concentrating, running his

blood cold, healinghim.He heard Rasputina’s voice echo on the wind fromabove them. She

howled, “Take him, Mara! Take himdown! Take him to Ramos! See that he gets

themessage!”She took him off the mountain, although he wouldnever know how she could

have. He fell unconscious,lulled comfortably by her life-giving ministrations.