December 2Sebastian demonstrated no fatigue nor uttered a breathof complaint as he

trudged through a stagnant channelof the sewers, several paces behind his master,

DoctorMcMourning. The channel was narrow and fairlyshallow. Intended as one of the

thousand such drainagechannels that fed excess water and the filth of thedenizens of the

vast city above them out of sight (andsmell, of course), to be taken away to some

unknownplace beyond Malifaux’s boundaries. In many placeswithin the intricate waste

removal system, thosetributary channels all met, forming one great river ofwaste that

coursed with the flow of any above groundriver, sometimes even dropping in successive

steps ofelevation creating raging rapids.Here, though, the width was no greater than

severallong strides for a man such as McMourning, and a fewmore for the short-legged

shuffling of Sebastian. Themuck, here, did not move, locked, no doubt, by someblockage of

filth further down its course.Although Sebastian uttered no complaint of the heavyburden

McMourning had strapped to his back, thequickly packaged remains of the abomination

andDeath Marshal, in addition to numerous tools andscientific apparatus strapped randomly

about his portlybody, they did slow him down. As McMourning steppedaround the vertical

pipe that marked the last turn in thesubterranean trek to their hidden lab, Sebastian

wasplunged into darkness. The illumination ofMcMourning’s dented old brakeman’s lantern

cast aruddy glow upon the oxidized patina around the thickbolts and joints of the pipe but

could not bend aroundthe corner to help Sebastian see his way. He tripped andnearly fell,

creating quite a commotion as he struck thewall and his various tools clattered about his

belly andwaist.McMourning’s head emerged from around the drainagepipe, and he lifted the

lantern to examine what hadbefallen his assistant. Sebastian merely smiled, the softrosy

cheeks like apples on either side of his bulbousnose. McMourning chastised him saying, “Do

be carefulwith my equipment!” Sebastian continued to smilerather vacantly, wiping the sweat

from his brow andfleshy upper lip with the back of his sleeve. “And keepup. We haven’t all

day to linger in the sewers!”Soon, McMourning was at the top of the iron laddercursing at

Sebastian, twelve feet below, for not shiningthe lantern so that he could see the trick lock

properly.To his credit, Sebastian did move the lantern asinstructed, but McMourning seemed

to always followwith a shift of his own torso, blocking the light shiningfrom below. Finally,

with a metal upon metal clang, theround portal swung open, and McMourningscampered out

of the sewers and into the relativecomfort of his apartments above.Sebastian licked his lips

and began the arduous laborof climbing the iron rungs, one hand still holding theantique

brakeman’s lantern, two corpse remainsstrapped to his back, and the various equipment

lashedabout his robust form, catching against each bar as heclimbed. Eventually, panting

and sweating ratherprofusely, he emerged to see McMourning playing withthe three large

dogs he had reanimated to guard thebuilding in his lengthy absences. A mastiff, a

Doberman,and a bulldog, each scampered about his feet, nowbootless as he had discarded

them beside the openportal leading to the labyrinthine sewers below,showing all the playful

loyalty a living dog might havedemonstrated toward a master returning home. Savea

heightened passion for killing, and patches of missingflesh (either through the natural

process of fleshlydecay or the necessary removal for McMourning’swork), they could,

indeed, pass for living companions.It was part of McMourning’s greatest discoveries:

whilehigher sentients were most often risen with a distinctlack of their passions in life, lower

life forms retainedmuch of it. Nicodem adamantly refused to wage warwith an army of canine

remains, however.McMourning, kicking away the zombie Chihuahua thathad finally come

into the old room, yipping and nippingat the big toe protruding from a hole in

McMourning’ssock, had to agree that not all of his dogs were equallygifted.“Sebastian!” he

barked. “Break’s over. Clean up ourfootwear and meet me in the primary lab. We havemuch

to prepare and little time. No dawdling now.”Sebastian had already begun those preparatory

steps

before commanded but nodded toward McMourningnevertheless.Minutes later (though

McMourning would chastise himfor taking his time), Sebastian was quickly shufflingdown the

main hall in the upper level of what mighthave long ago been a mansion for a

forgottenNeverborn aristocrat. Neither he nor the doctor sawwhat the building may have

once been, for their darkarts, practiced deep within the Quarantine Zone,needed the open

chambers that the ornate and well-crafted building provided. Thick dust had

accumulatedalong the sides of the hall, but the center was well-wornby their regular

footsteps, the stain upon the woodblackened over the ages. Sebastian rarely perceived

thesmall eyes glowing at him from the shadows along theceiling or behind the ribbed vaults

and protrudingbuttresses due to the building’s inherent menagerie ofMcMourning’s creatures

and original statues bothstanding alone or carved in relief on the wood andmarble structure.

“Clean out the vermin” was, to date,the only command he had not been able to fulfill.

Whenhe had gotten close enough to grab whatever smallcreature might be hiding in the

shadows, his thickfingers would fall upon open air, perplexing him. Hedutifully kept at it,

throughout the mansion for daysbefore McMourning chastised him for dallying. Ofcourse,

when Sebastian reminded him of the assignedtask McMourning’s response was, “What little

eyes inthe shadows?” and his own eyes darted back and forthin genuine paranoia. They

came to ignore whatevermysterious creatures might inhabit the building withhim.He arrived

at the reinforced iron door of McMourning’sexperimental lab. It was secured, and the frame

hadbeen equally reinforced with wrought iron. He pulledthe large lever that released the long

bolts within thatframe, and it swung open with a groan on thick hinges.Getting into the lab

was easy. Once the great doorclosed, however, those iron bolts would clang into placeand it

would take several moments to navigate thestrange locking mechanism to open it again to

leave. Likeso much of McMourning’s attitude toward life, theappearance of security was a

reversal of commonexpectation. He gave no concern in keeping anyone outof his research

lab. It was designed to keep hisexperiments in and withstand their assault to

thecontrary.Sebastian nodded politely at one of McMourning’snurses that sauntered toward

him as he entered thesmall chamber adjoining the larger lab beyond. In thedim lighting of the

ante-chamber she might haveseemed young and beautiful. Her outfit, a small dressdesigned

more for a schoolgirl, was grimy, a stainedmockery of the uniform of a proper hospital nurse.

Herlegs and arms were bare and struck him, as always, withtemptation. He fought against it,

turning from her andhurrying into the main chamber where he,unfortunately, collided bodily

with another ofMcMourning’s beautiful nurses, standing just within thefinal entry to the

lab.Before she could turn to face him, he was struck by thesickly cloud of perfume she wore,

mixed with the sweetscent of alchemical mixtures and formaldehyde. Herhair, long and thick,

was cocked too far to her left; a wig,shifting upon the wrinkled flesh beneath. Her smile

wasas much an illusion as the rest of her beauty. The skinwas pulled taut from either side of

her mouth andpulled up toward her ears. Her forehead and eyes, too,were pulled by the

flesh toward her skull. Her eyes, infact, most quickly dispelled the illusion of youthfulbeauty.

The flesh of her face was merely a mask, theskin of another woman, young and beautiful,

removedand placed upon this venerable woman, desperate toretain a youthful beauty that

was now denied to her.The flesh around the eye sockets was drying quickerthan the rest,

treated perpetually with variousconcoctions designed to preserve the flesh and stave offthe

inevitable decay and rot of death. Her own dark skinbeneath the mask was visible along the

edges of hereyes, wrinkled in age.Not many beyond Sebastian had seen

McMourning’snurses. One might suspect that he, like his counterpart,Seamus, surrounded

himself by women he madebeautiful. McMourning, however, took little notice ofthe women

charged with the task of maintaining hiscreations. It was the nurses, themselves, desperate

topreserve a beauty that had long since faded, that filledtheir own veins with the diluted

formulas they used topreserve the flesh of McMourning’s monsters.She stared at him, rather

vacantly. Her grasp of realitywas tenuous at best. Sebastian nodded at her andsqueezed

past.A large wheel window far above them offered the onlylight into the room and cast

illumination upon the seriesof four tables bolted to the floor in the center of theroom. Dim

light fell upon animated creatures confinedin cages within recesses along the periphery of

the

chamber. Great bottles and beakers contained brains,hearts, and other organs collected

from various animals,people, and Neverborn. They decorated the room andwere found on

every shelf and cabinet. Salted limbsfrom numerous creatures hung in rows as might be

seenin a horrible meat cellar. The scene might disturb anyman, even a seasoned Death

Marshal like the corpse onthe table before McMourning. But not Sebastian – hehad prepared

most of the macabre spare parts aboutthe room.“Sebastian!” McMourning exclaimed,

startled when hisassistant cleared his throat beside him. “Well, it’s abouttime.” He pointed at

the Death Marshal killed earlier atthe morgue. “Do you think his brain will fare better thanthe

one we have installed in Big Frank?” He hitched histhumb over his shoulder at the great

flesh constructchained to the wall behind them.“I wouldn’t know, suh,” Sebastian admitted.

Althougheager to begin his quest for his old professor,McMourning’s facial twitch indicated

his mind wasexploring several full thoughts at once. McMourninghad the singular brilliance

that enabled him to carry onthose unique thoughts a normal man could only

handleindividually. The doctor could juggle several at once,each with precise detail. His

awareness of the tangibleworld, however, became unfortunately suppressedduring these

odd meditative visions, leaving it toSebastian to look after him and protect him from

anyevidence that might implicate him in the narrow-mindedview of others too enslaved by

antiquated notions ofmorality that forever impeded the progress of science.At least that’s

what McMourning said with fairregularity.“Hmm. We don’t have time anyway.” He turned

fromthe corpse and faced the abomination remains on thenext table, then hesitated and

turned back to stare atthe Death Marshal once more. “Good point,” he said inresponse to

nothing Sebastian said and looked quicklyover his shoulder to be sure no one else was

there.“Hate to waste it. Only hours old. Surely superior to thecriminal’s brain we’ve got in

there now. Very well,Sebastian. You’ve convinced me!” He clapped hisassistant on the back,

violent enough to brieflyimbalance him before he could step back and standupright again.

“Preserve the brain for later. Get the stemthis time, too. You always cut too close to the base

ofthe skull. Oh, just get the whole column right to thepelvis.” He turned to face the

abomination then spunback to the Marshal. “Hate to preserve it, too, huh?”Sebastian spoke

for only the second time since enteringthe lab. “I don’t mind, suh.”McMourning continued

with a conversation Sebastianwas only vaguely privy to. “Exactly! The preservationmight

actually impede the recall functions. Good point.You’ll help me install it into Big Frank while I

journey intothe wilds!” He smiled broadly, wringing his hands,though his plan had him doing

two things at once.Sebastian understood. Although absent-minded andoften unaware of

events occurring around him,McMourning’s thoughts were perpetually on hisanatomical

sciences, working out the most obscuremysteries of nature. Sebastian had come to

understandthat part of his addled confusion came from the feverishattempt he made to have

his experiments catch thefleeting thoughts cascading through his brilliant mind.“Will you be

needin’ assistance in the wild, too, suh,” hehesitated, pondering the strange thought in his

mindbefore continuing, “or is it sufficient I should stay b’hindto assist … youin the op’ration?”

McMourning thoughtof both necrotic operations and believed he was in bothplaces at once.

Sebastian played along rather thanengage in an inevitable argument about their

reality.McMourning looked at him as if the shorter man weretruly crazy. “Don’t be so dim,

Sebastian,” he said. “Ofcourse I need you to assist me here while I find theprofessor.”“I see,”

Sebastian said, but he didn’t. “Very good then.The wilds are fairly wild, suh. Canno’ take

Frank as you’ll,well, you’llbe workin’ on ‘im here. As it were. Shouldyou be takin’ another to

help out there?”McMourning got a gleam in his eye. “Oh, goodie,goodie. A field test of the

chimera!”“Yes, but one ‘ed don’t seem to be workin’ quite rightyet.”“One ‘ed’? Oh, ‘head’!

Yes, well. So long as it doesn’t falloff it’ll suffice. It’s just the ram’s head. Not good

formuch.”Sebastian nodded and spun the crank on his circular sawuntil it sputtered to life,

black smoke pouring from theengine on his back, the gears spinning loudly in a roarthat filled

the room. He slid the quickly twirling bladeinto the back of the Marshal, severing the torso in

aclean line. Blood, not yet congealed, sprayed upon

Sebastian and across the lab. It was a clean cut but notexactly surgically precise.

McMourning took no furthernotice of the operation, however, preparing theabomination for

travel once more, and he carried it tothe three-headed necromantic creation confined in

thebowels of the lab, sure that he was also recreating BigFrank all the while.CCCThe

wilderness north of the Bayou now cracked with ajagged scar that stretched far beyond the

surveyor’sexpeditions, teemed with dangers both natural andstrange. Those unexplainable

dangers that sought toplay upon his fears and anxiety were met with thestrange and twisted

mind of McMourning, lost, partially,in a strange dementia already, for he had done

heinousdeeds and had contemplated far more, enough that hisgrasp of reality was already

stretched thin. In dealingwith natural threats, McMourning and the greatchimera, a

necromantic monstrosity never imaginedbefore, handled with relative ease. The creature’s

massive body was once a SabertoothCerberus, created by arcane magics unfathomable

toMcMourning, but the massive body had been furtherenhanced, augmented by his own

perverseexperimentation. Seeking to outdo its original design,McMourning had replaced the

three heads of the beast,offering it new abilities to make it superior to the stockbeast upon

which it was based. One head, for example,now demonstrated his greatest mastery of

anatomicalscience and necromantic art, for a towering RazorspineRattler’s head rose at its

center; a perfect merging ofreptilian and mammalian biology. To its left was thehead of a

rare Northern Ram, a beast found only at thehighest point of the Northern Mountains. The

ramsstood as tall as a man at the shoulder and have beenseen to pounce from at least a

hundred feet to strike itsprey with their colossal rack, breaking the skull or spinebefore the

victim knew it was even being stalked. Likemany species native to Malifaux, the Northern

Ramswere voracious carnivores. Unfortunately, despite thegrand effort and expense

McMourning put into thecapture of the creature, the bounty hunters managedto bring him

only a hornless runt, seemingly abandonedby its pack, and not quite as clever as they

wererumored to be. McMourning had still made use of itthough it had a tendency to look at

the surroundinglandscape while the other two heads fought with thebestial ferocity they were

known for in life. It also hadthe strange urge to bleat incessantly, but only whenMcMourning

tried to sleep or ordered it silent to avoiddetection. Its third head was the original

Sabertooth’sthat had been removed so that a different creature’shead could be mounted in

its place. Naturally, no moreferocious creature could be found, so he put the originalback on.

He didn’t realize it, and wouldn’t have likelythought it an important detail, but he used

theSabertooth’s original lefthead and mounted it on theright spinal branch so the entire beast

had a habit ofjerking the wrong way at the last second of a charge,forcing the Razorspine

head to snap over the other untilit could turn appropriately. The ram head would simplylook

on confused. Despite these oddities and setbacks,it was still formidable, and most predators

gave them awide berth, no doubt perceiving somethingsupernaturally strange about the

great beast.So he walked, unimpeded and without fear, through thewoodland whose canopy

far above blocked out almostall light. Other than the gray darkness making his

stepsuncertain, there was sparse undergrowth to slow them.Although frigid, the previous

day’s snow was soft andlight and did not penetrate the wooded canopy toaccumulate more

than an inch.Like most of Marcus’ prey, McMourning had no idea themuscular man

traversed the thick branches above withthe ease and quiet of a squirrel, despite the bulk

andvarious hunting trophies of bone or tooth thatdecorated his body on necklaces and

lashed toarmbands or woven into the knotted dreadlocks of hishair. He maintained the pace

of the grotesquemonstrosity below him, stinking up his woodlandterritory for many miles

around, and its Resurrectionistcreator was far worse, smelling of sweat, sewage, andacrid

chemicals that had stained his skin too deeply towash away. Marcus could smell them

easily, even fromhis perch dozens of feet above.McMourning spoke to the zombified

creature,complaining about its bleating though it was he whocould not remain silent, his

voice carrying over the stillair of the forest floor.Marcus focused upon the power of the bear,

his thickmuscles swelling into dense knots, and he channeledthe fast firing muscles of the

serpent, twisting each fiberin his body. The process took but a second, although itwas

painful as his own anatomy bent into a newconfiguration of reshaped muscle and bone.

Hegnashed his teeth, suppressing the pain although he

couldn’t help but growl gutturally with the unpleasantsensations and the rising anticipation of

the hunt thatwas about to come to an end. He leapt from the branch,extending his body as

he moved to the next tree sometwenty feet away. His hands found the branch easily,

andwith a jerk he propelled his body forward toward thetrunk. If McMourning had looked

straight up he wouldhave seen the predator stalking him and darting directlyoverhead. The

Sabertooth’s ears twitched and the headdid look up, but too late, and caught only the

trailingblur of Marcus legs as he disappeared again in thefoliage. It ignored it.Marcus ran

lithely and with the surefooted movementof a hare upon the twisted and knotty branch.

Hefocused again upon the power of the serpent as he dovefrom the branch, striking like an

eagle from above. Thehooked wooden staff upon his back was pulled from theleather strap

that held it in place, and he felt the familiartwisting of the wood, dense and solid from his

ownarcane experimental perversion of the natural fibers sothat it was all but indestructible

although as light as atwig. It twirled at his side until he had the balance of itcorrect, and he

held it firm as he dove. His body hit theground in front of McMourning, and he grunted

audiblyas the violence of his fall drove the wind from his lungs.One leg was bent below him,

ready to propel himforward in attack.McMourning squealed, much akin to a young

girl,Marcus thought, and jumped back. His repulsivechimera crouched quickly and prepared

to spring, butMarcus’ own Sabertooth Cerberus burst from behind athick copse growing

upon the forest floor besideMcMourning’s path. It was a perfect place for ambush,and

McMourning walked right into the trap. The livingCerberus batted the head of its dead

counterpart witha heavy paw, claws raking deeply into its dry flesh. TheRazorspine head

reared back, hissing and prepared tostrike, but the living Sabertooth’s three heads

howledferociously, reverberating in a Doppler echo as eachsounded identical to the other.

The necromantic beasthesitated, which gave Marcus the chance to end it, orits master,

Doctor McMourning.Instead, crouched in a striking position before him,Marcus laughed,

deep and throaty. He rose beforeMcMourning and said, “Did you wet yourself or is thatthe

stink you bore into my woods?”“Marcus, damn you!” McMourning growled. “Youscared the

hell out of me.”“You weren’t being careful enough. Not out here. Ithought I taught you better

than that.”“Yes, well, it’s been a long time since I’ve sat through oneof your lectures and the

‘how to survive an attack by acrazy man in the woods’ was likely as boring as any

otherlecture you gave, so I wouldn’t remember it.”Marcus snorted. “Boring? I remember you

had found mylectures somewhat different than that.”McMourning ignored him. “Look what

your tri-rostalmachairodont did to my masterpiece!” McMourningsaid sarcastically. “Tore the

skin right off its cheek. That’llleave a mark, you know!” He shook his head. “Well,what’s done

is done. You’re looking well. Beefing up, Isee.” He looked upon Marcus with unbidden

jealously.Although decades older than him, Marcus looked robustand young; more vibrant

and virile than should bepossible for a man of his advanced age. “Eating well, orsomething,”

he said with a sneer.“You have no idea.”“I suppose not. How’s my niece?” McMourning

asked.“You still using her as one of your infernal lab rats?”Marcus was about to answer but

an odd voice behindMcMourning that sounded both familiar and foreign,interrupted him. The

words sounded as if they weremade by the brushing of sticks and branches. It said, “Iam no

lab experiment!” McMourning turned just in timeto see a dense tree and shrub change

before his eyes asitmoved, charging him, shifting into a wolf-like creaturebut made entirely of

flora. He had no time to move, buthis mind had just enough time to understand it to be

alegendary Waldgeist, a woodland spirit beast. As itpounced, its form shifted again, and in

the moment itshind legs left the ground she became the beautifulMyranda.McMourning

smiled briefly, recognizing his niece, butsaw at once she was not happy to see him. Her

arm,human once more, twisted from her forearm to the endof each finger so that it became a

sinister claw bearingthick and sharp talons. She clearly meant to kill her uncle.Marcus

caught McMourning beneath the ribs with thecurved hook of his shillelagh and pulled him

aside. Heleapt forward in a flash and caught Myranda’s wrist andheld it firm. She struggled

to get free, but Marcus heldher fast.

“Not doing any experiments on her?” McMourningasked sarcastically, rubbing his

side.Marcus said, “None my mate doesn’t want, herself.”“Did you call her your ‘mate’?

What’s next, a litter? Oh,Myranda, the family will not be happy with you. Youknow how they

feel about our former professor, nowliving in exile. And he’s old enough to be

yourgrandfather.”Marcus was unperturbed by his taunting, and evengrinned wolfishly at his

masculine conquest, butMyranda spat, “Go to hell, you freak! Like they’dwelcome youback

after what you did to me?”McMourning could see that the scar on her exposedmidriff had

disappeared, likely a result of their work onreshaping the physical form. Hehad apologized

and wasonly trying to help her anatomical studies after all. Hethought she should be over all

of that by now anyway.He had forgotten it. “Look at this thing,” she jerked freeof Marcus’ grip

and motioned to his necromantic beast.She stomped away, between McMourning and

thecreature, glaring at her uncle all the while. “It’sdeplorable,” she said in a growl.

“You’redeplorable.”The ram’s head stretched out its dark gray tongue to lickher as she

passed, and it bleated loudly when she jerkedaway.“Ugh!” she protested, and, not to be

stopped this time,her powerful claw ripped down through its neck at thepoint where it was

affixed to the body, nearly severingit completely before she turned into a black jungle catand

bound away. The ram’s head dangled from thebody by several thick cords of flesh and

muscle. Itbleated again but sounded choked as it dangled upsidedown.“She seems more

difficult than ever,” McMourning said,knowing that her anger was directed solely at him

andnot the beast he had animated.“I’ve noticed. A byproduct of the bestial changes

herbody’s going through. I’m working on it.”“I should never have introduced you two.”“She’s

as devout a scientist as you ever were,” Marcussaid. “Perhaps more so.”McMourning rolled

his eyes. “Do you not question theethics of your experimentation?” Marcus arched

aneyebrow, silently accusing McMourning of hypocrisy.“You’re right, you’re right,”

McMourning admitted.“Fine. Look at this,” he said, thrusting his open palms atthe head

dangling from his creation, turning in place,confused. “Do you have any idea how much work

thattook?”Marcus bent to examine the exposed anatomy, rare tosee its cross-section in

movement even in a conditionsuch as this. “Interesting choice to connect the

vertebralsynapses from the inside of the ram’s eighth vertebraeto the Cerberus’ third, along

the outer perimeter of thetissues. Why did you do that?”There was no accusation in his

voice, merely scientificcuriosity. McMourning had no answer and didn’t reallyknow whether

he was supposed to answer thequestion regarding the number of vertebrae or theconnective

tissue. He hadn’t, honestly, thought eitherof those issues bore any significance to the

operationof the beast. “Oh, you know, just allows it to behavemore normally this way.” He

had no idea. Still, Marcusnodded.“I understand you must replace much of the living fluidwith

this foul necrotic substance, but wouldn’t it bebetter to bypass the primary aorta, here, and

pump itthrough the smaller vessels surrounding it? Seems thatit would give it more longevity

as well as more naturalresponses to external stimuli.”McMourning had never considered

that, either.“Still, the anatomy between the two creatures is sodifferent that the head of the

Razorspine should notfunction at all. I’d like to see your notes on theconnectivity and

functionality of the grafted unionbetween species.”McMourning beamed beneath the scrutiny

and praiseof his former professor. “Yes. It’s my finestaccomplishment. It’s the best of the

three, too!” Ofcourse, McMourning took no notes on any of his work.It would implicate him

too severely should anyonediscover them, and he had near full recall of everyexperiment he

had ever conducted, down to the mostminute detail.“I wish I had the opportunity to study it in

greater detail.Good work, Doctor.”

With the rare praise offered by Marcus still ringing in hisears, McMourning gave a

semi-mocking bow andgestured at his creature. With the flourish and bravadoof a stage

performer, he said proudly, “Just take it. It’dprobably lose that head before I could make it

back tomy lab anyway.”Marcus nodded, inspecting the two halves, genuinelyconfused and

impressed by some of the connectionsMcMourning had made. He shook his hand with a

snapand primal green flame erupted from within him toengulf it. He pressed the head against

the base of theCerberus’ body and where the organs met, he pressedthe flame. The beast

shifted uncomfortably, but Marcusheld it in place, his bare arms flexing against the

powerfulmovement of the creature, remarkably unable to resisthim. He shushed it with a

warm and reassuring glanceand continued to rub the flame in the severed woundslike a

balm. Soon he was done and shook his hand again,and the flames grew brighter so that

McMourning hadto shield his eyes from the brilliance. The head was firmlymounted again,

and it bleated happily at Marcus. Hepressed the flames against its forehead, above the

eyes,pushing hard against it so that it was pushed backward.Within moments two horns

pressed from its skull,growing before McMourning’s disbelieving eyes untilthey curved

around its ears and along its jaws,thickening, too, even as its entire head and neck grew,the

muscles more defined and thick.“Why’d you use such a sickly specimen?” Marcus askedhim

as the fire dissipated. McMourning sighed, thinkingof the months it took and the thousands

of Guild scriptto bag this one. He just shrugged.Marcus stared deeply into the eyes of the

Cerberus head,and with a wave and deep throated growl, the beastunderstood his command

and it bound off into thewoods to await the will of its new master. It moved withthe more

natural gait of the feline it once was, whichirritated McMourning further. Marcus took a

deepbreath and turned toward him. “Why are you out here?”he asked.McMourning said,

“Looking for you. For your lab.”“You found me. And you’re in it.”McMourning looked around.

Of course this was his lab.Gone were the days of the meek professor lost behind amound of

books for hours on end. He now lived andbreathed those experiments that sought to stifle

theprocesses of disease and aging, perhaps to abolishthem altogether. Judging by his

appearance, he mayhave unlocked those secrets. “You know I hate to everhave to admit it,

but I have a problem that only you maybe able to solve.” He pointed toward the

packagecontaining the ancient abomination several yards awayon the ground, where he had

inadvertently hurled itwhen Marcus fell in front of him. Marcus crouchedabove the canvas

bag where it was discarded andremoved it to examine those remains the Ortegas

hadbrought to McMourning months before. He explainedhis findings, that the strange

humanoid was neitherhuman nor Neverborn. Marcus needed none of theresearch apparatus

McMourning had brought, noteven the magnifying glass. He just squinted and staredat the

smallest thing and seemed to understand it on afundamental level. “I agree,” he said after a

brief examination. “I cannottell what this poor creature might once have been. Itdoes share

many of the attributes of both species,which should not be possible. But, then, look at

youand me,” he said, rubbing at the rough stubble on hisface. “Defying natural law is our

bread and butter.” Hesighed and stood in a smooth movement. “Go back toyour lab. I’ll send

a messenger when I’ve discoveredsomething.”“I can’t.” He explained how his crimes had

caught upwith him and how the Guild had more than a strongsuspicion he was behind the

missing bodies from themorgue.“You play such a risky game hiding amongst the Guild.Doing

their work for them so that you can do yoursright beneath their noses. You need to shift the

blameor cut your losses and run.”“I’m working on it. Of course, I could hide out in thewoods

and conduct my little experiments?”McMourning didn’t know she was there, but Myrandahad

perched in the tree above them in the form of alarge raptor and quickly shifted back into her

naturalstate, now much more in control than she had beenminutes earlier. “The girl Kaeris

asked us to examine,”she said ambiguously.“What girl?”Marcus frowned. “I don’t want to get

involved,” he saidup to Myranda, lounging against the trunk of the tree.

“You already are. They came to us because of her ability.To heal in minutes rather than

days.”McMourning nodded, impressed, and considered thechanges to various glands and

organs that might allowit, his mind working thrillingly to figure out the biologicalprocesses.

“How does she do that?”“We do not know. I haven’t studied her.”Myranda said, “But you

want to. And it might kill her. Or,if her ability’s strong enough, she may live through

thevivisection, and then you’ll have to kill her or she’ll ratyou out to the Guild. Make her look

like the Doctor’sbody thief and then have your way with her. Besides,you cannot ignore

Ramos. He’s given you this girl as agift. It may provide answers to the last of

yourquestions.”“But is it a gift? Or a test of my loyalty? It’s been a longtime since he and I

taught together at Vienna. He needsme more than I need him.”Myranda didn’t agree. “We

need him more than youcare to admit. Consider his funding. This girl he wantsyou to

examine. You owe him more than you’readmitting.”Marcus considered her words. “Yes.

Always in his debt.How do you know he does not simply want her asanother warrior in his

crusade?”Myranda laughed. “He wants youbeside him muchmore than some girl with an

over-active glandularproblem.”Marcus nodded reluctantly. He sought escape from thepeople

of civilization, and the further he went to escape,the harder they worked to bring him back in.

He sighed.Turning back to McMourning, he said, “So you cannotgo back to the City until we

clear your name. You cannotsurvive out here for more than a day, and--”McMourning cut

him off. “I’ve been out here for twodays already!”“I’ve been following you since you entered

the wood, atRook’s Trail. Otherwise you’d have been dead.”McMourning nodded. That was

where he entered thewoods. Marcus continued, “And I doubt you’ll be ableto keep up with

us.”“Where are you going?”“Down into the pit. I need to see where these things arecoming

from.”“We’re getting the girl, first,” Myranda said matter-of-factly. Marcus scowled at her.

“Field test.”