Dead of Winter

By Scott Ollenberger

Editor's Note: Dead of Winter was written as part of a worldwide campaign in February 2013. Various events around the world influenced how each faction did in the story each week.

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The Neverborn

Shimmer glided silently through the night air. It leapt from shadow to shadow like a child climbing on furniture. It had never been to this part of the scar before. Usually it stayed away from this area and the hole in the ravine wall. A few nights ago, however, something had changed. The cave began to sing, the discordant lullaby floating on the night winds. Like many others, Shimmer was drawn home to the familial song.

Shimmer knew that the cave needed protection. Like the others, he was aware that more would be coming to find whatever had laid dormant for so long. The creature didn't know what was in there; only that it was important and that others would want it, especially those coming from the city. They had come to this world seeking power and whatever was in there was a part of that search.

The song grew stronger now; he could hear it clearly from atop the ridge. His tail curled and flicked with satisfaction, but his talons gripped the rock hard enough to crack his boulder perch. Shimmer's claws knew something he didn't.

Others like him would come soon. They might seek the power; hopefully they would arrive to protect it. Shimmer couldn't know which; the others were as varied in motive as they were in form. Some, like him, were content simply to exist. Was it not enough to have escaped? Why must they seek to destroy that which provides such delicious suffering when left to their own devices?

Truthfully, it didn't matter to Shimmer who came or why. No one was entering that cave as long as he stood guard there. They would have to destroy him in order to enter and that was no easy task; so many had tried that he had long ago lost his bloodlust.

Shimmer stretched to his full height in preparation for a long guard. His leathery wings extended so wide that the waters a mile down the ravine rippled in the wind; his body so thick with brushed iron scales that he cast a shadow over the ravine, blotting out the moon.

Perhaps if it kept the others out long enough, the power would belong to it…

The Guild

Hansen surveyed the canyon from his vantage point atop the ridge. Reasonably certain that he and his small posse of Death Marshals were the first to arrive, he looked to the horizon and saw no one. Hansen stayed low, just in case. They were alone, at least for now. Others would come. He didn't know how many even knew about this place. However he was sure that he wouldn't be the only one to come looking for it. Whatever was down there was too important for the others to ignore, even if no one was sure exactly why.

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The intelligence had come in just a few days ago. One of the long range pathfinders came into Malifaux to bring in the report personally. Usually they were under orders to send messages by carrier bird but this was too important to take chances with. Reports claimed that there was a large deposit of Soulstone. That wasn't unusual for the area. There was something else.

The place just didn't feel right and there was a soft glow at night. Speculation among the Guild leadership ran rampant, with opinions varying wildly. Only one thing was certain, it had to be investigated. Honestly, he thought that they knew more than they were letting on. That's the way things operate; need to know.

Hansen had been chosen because of his extensive work out here. They had even allowed him to handpick his team and arm them from one of the private armories. He didn't even know that stockpiles of that quality existed. The Guild had truly spared no expense. Whatever was out there they wanted to get to it first.

He had sent a couple of men out to scout the ridge, they were returning. Maybe it was safe to start heading down the slope...

The Arcanists

When Ramos' envoy said, "I have a job for you," his voice filled the room like warm water.

Pieter was astonished to see the man in person. This must be important. He replied as succinctly as possible, "How may I be of service?"

"I have a mission of great importance, and greater secrecy. I would go myself, but that would seem imprudent. You must prepare for an excursion into the East. You will continue until you find a great scar in the land. I do not believe this place is a natural occurrence. According to the divinations, there will be a cavern. There is something there that we want you to retrieve."

"What is it I'll be looking for?"

"That I do not know. Something clouds our sight. I am assured that you will know it when you find it. You come highly recommended. Take with you a small contingent to protect you. Surely there will be others hunting for it as well."

"I will leave immediately."

"No!" The arcanist's body grew rigid, filled with sudden fear and doubt. Was that simple remark enough to cause him to question Pieter's chances at success? Pieter took note, this journey must be critical.

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The envoy forced himself to relax as he spoke, "You will depart under cover of night. Stay away from traveled paths. Take care not to be seen. If you are questioned, tell them that the Union has sent you to check out a possible new mining site. Is that understood?"

"It shall be done." Pieter was uncertain what was expected of him next, so he gave a short bow.

The envoy left without acknowledgement. In the empty chamber Pieter sighed and felt fear with a hint of excitement. He readied his things and sent word to his enforcers. He gave them the instructions they needed and nothing more. The details he would keep to himself. This was his chance to make a name for himself…

The Outcasts

Tara sat on an outcropping of rock overlooking a ravine. She had simply stopped to camp for the night. It was a good spot, she could see if anyone was tracking her from all angles and there was a small concave to the ground which would allow her a low fire if she set up her tent strategically. She could escape in almost any direction. It was a good spot, considering the price on her head. Things weren't so simple, as it turns out. It was about midnight when she first felt the chill. It wasn't a chill from the wind or any natural phenomenon; it was more akin to the kind of itch she got when there were Neverborn nearby. This was different, somehow.

She raised her head from her almost sleep to peer over the edge of the ravine and saw that there was a slight glow from a cave at the bottom. Hastily, she gathered her gear and headed down the slope. It occurred to her for a moment that she didn't know why she was in such a hurry.

As she approached she heard a sound from within. Not any discernible voice or voices, nothing she could make out. She instinctively knew that it was the sound of a person, or people, talking. This was no natural speech. She had dealt with Arcanists, Resurrectionists, and even Neverborn before. This wasn't any of those either. It wasn't a language with latin origin. The words themselves repeated, but she couldn't quite understand the entirety of them. They were oily, and slipped from her mind as they passed through.

A small series of shadows moved near the bottom. Tara knew she wasn't alone. This was information she could sell and she knew exactly who to sell it to…

The Resurrectionists

Karina was a ressurectionist, not a grunt. She disdained being out here in the dust and wind. She hated walking long distances even more. The muscles in her legs ached, and the bottoms of her soft feet had grown numb. Truly, she hated the outdoors all together, in a way that only the persecuted could hate. It was supposed to be an honor to have been selected for a mission of this

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importance. It felt more like a punishment to her. She didn't really have much of a choice in the matter, though. If she had turned it down she might never get another chance to prove herself, not to mention her mentor would be furious. No, she had to accept this mission and go out into the open air. At least she had her friends with her. She preferred the company of the dead.

Truth be told, Karina didn't even know what she was expected to do. Everything that came from those in the know had been so damned cryptic. "Follow the rising sun for eight nights. There, under the glow of the last star you will find the power you seek." How was that better than clear instructions? Karina hated wasted poetry almost as much as the wilderness. Well, she was walking East, had been for eight days. Hopefully tonight she would reach her destination.

She didn't really know what she was looking for. That's how it usually was with these mandates. There was a ravine up ahead, or was it a canyon? She could never keep these outdoors designations straight in her head. Why even have two words for the same thing? It wasn't like the critical designations between the eighth and ninth vertebrae. Why not just label them with numbers? That would make sense.

Karina allowed herself to muse on the flaws within the cartographic disciplines for only a few moments. Hopefully this was where she was supposed to be. She would see soon enough…

The Ten Thunders

Takeada looked over his team; four of the best men, handpicked by Takeada himself for this mission. Doshi, master of the bow, was to his right. His skills would be very useful from an overhang or outcropping of rock; after any guards were dealt with, of course.

Then there were the twins, Roshan and Hiro. Roshan was a stealthy assassin, his blades coming from nowhere. If anyone could be called a master of shadows it was him. Hiro could open any lock or disarm a trap in just a few seconds. With him there wouldn't be any problems getting in.

Then there was Po, fully a head taller than any of the others and twice the weight. He was as strong as any three normal men and surprisingly agile and quick for his size. Although he wasn't the smartest warrior around, he was unparalleled in combat.

And of course Takeada himself was a master swordsman. This team would do, they wouldn't fail. There was too much at stake.

He knew this mission was important to the clan, even if the masters hadn't exactly given clear orders. Apparently there was something in that cave that was very valuable. Honor demanded that he succeed, and succeed he would. Failure had never come to him before. He looked across the rough ground between his team's hiding spot and the entrance to the cave. All looked clear.

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He used a series of hand gestures to communicate this to his team and they silently moved forward. Takeada was certain that none of those at the top of the ravine knew they had made it this far. Not the posse with their coffins and guns, not even the monster curled atop the boulders directly above them.

Pieter had walked for days, following the path that the envoy laid out for him. It hadn't been easy by any definition of the word. The main difficulty had been the weather; it was unseasonably cold, perhaps winter was coming early this year. He kicked himself for not being prepared, Malifaux's seasons were merely a mathematical suggestion after all. Fortunately, bandits had made the mistake of trying to rob them. Pieter's cadre was able to gather winter supplies from the corpses. And now, after more hard miles, it seemed they had arrived at their destination.

For a moment Pieter allowed himself to reflect on the sequence of events that brought him to this place. He looked back the direction he had come. It had been over a week of travel. He couldn't see the smoke of Malifaux, from this far out, which made him oddly nervous. In fact, he had never been this far from the city, and somewhere in the back of his brain he had doubts about navigating the return trip. He almost felt a sense of accomplishment when he thought of that, how far he had come in this task. It certainly was an honor to have been chosen for this journey. Pieter shook the cold off of his shoulders and filled his lungs with determination in one long breath.

He looked over his men. They were a solid group, well-trained sorcerers. He had hand-picked them for this journey without knowing exactly what he was facing. Pieter had tried to build a versatile and capable group and he was confident that he had succeeded. They had already performed perfectly in action against the bandits.

Now Pieter turned his gaze forward. A large chasm lay ahead of him, like a dark river a few miles across the plain. It seemed unnatural, as if some great talon had serrated the ground apart. The sunset on the horizon cast its graying light over this chasmal wound in the earth. The shadows within moved with aching slowness as they yawned to life in the fading light. There could be no question he was in the right place.

"It will be night by the time we make the last few miles." His voice came gruffly, hours of silent travel had left it stiff. Pieter began breaking for camp. "We'll enter the ravine in the morning, keep the fire low."

This feeling was exhilarating, eager curiosity mixed with chilled morning air and the smell of salted bacon cooking on an open fire. Pieter could hardly maintain his composure. The power and recognition he desired lay just ahead in that ravine. Although he still had no idea what it was he was here for, he stood a little straighter as he emerged from the small camp's only tent. No man or beast would stand in his way. He looked over his crew to see if he could get a read on them. Were they as excited as he was or were they afraid of what may slumber down there? Fear, they say, keeps you on your toes. Was he afraid? Certainly he was anxious and yes, perhaps just a little afraid as well.

"Finish breakfast, I want to get an early start." It was time to face that fear.

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An hour later they approached the chasm at a steady pace, taking note of their surroundings and keeping an eye out for hidden dangers. Pieter had no idea what to expect once he was at the bottom, or even where to start searching. He had been assured by the envoy that he would know it when he found it, and so far that had held true. The chasm itself was fairly obvious, after all. Hopefully whatever was down there was just as recognizable. The ground declined into the entrance of the ravine, the canyon walls rising on either side.

The walls of the chasm were jagged but not in a random sort of way. There was almost a discernible pattern to it, something at the edge of conscious perception that pulled at the eyes. Again Pieter imagined giant claws digging into the ground and tearing it asunder. Thankfully he knew of no creature capable of this sort of destruction. The thought seemed ridiculous; if there were a creature large and powerful enough to do this surely someone would have seen it by now. Even the most powerful of the Neverborn were incapable of this. He shoved such thoughts from his head; that line of thinking would only lead to hesitation.

It seemed to get darker the farther down they went. Not just the shadows from the walls as one would expect. It was as if the mid-morning light struggled to press through honey. The shadows were casting shadows of their own, dancing on the walls in spasms of exertion. Along with the darkness was a chill. It was noticeably colder down here than on the surface. There was a power in the air, almost certainly magic. Pieter could smell the tang of the arcane on the breeze.

By the time they reached the floor of the chasm the darkness and cold had grown oppressive. Pieter looked around at his men and could tell that they were anxious. Perhaps they could feel that something wasn't right here. He knew it, as well. There was something down here that was powerful. Of course, he knew that there would be, why else would they have come here? They moved forward cautiously, peering behind every outcropping of rock and into each crevasse.

The caution of their advance made it all the more shocking when a man stepped onto the path. His eyes sunk into the shade of his brow, his cheeks stretched thin over his jaw, framed by graying hair. His dark brown duster sputtered a bit in the wind, and the brim of his hat was pressed low, covering the tops of his ears. Pieter had been warned that others would be coming for it as well. Of course the Guild would send their Death Marshals.

He was certain that this man would have backup, probably snipers hidden in the rocky environment. His group of Arcanists was exposed out in the open; he cursed himself silently for not thinking to send someone to scout the perimeter. Perhaps he could get out of this without a fight.

"Good day, sir," said Pieter. "What brings you out to this desolate place?"

"I'll be askin' the questions here, prospector." The last word had the hint of a question to it. Pieter had forgotten that they were dressed as a mining crew. This might be easier than he had hoped. "Why are you and your crew this far from Malifaux?"

Handing him the fake orders he had been given, Pieter took on the tone of a rugged, and if he was honest with himself, ignorant sounding man. Spitting on a nearby stone (nasty habit, he thought) he wiped his mouth before handing over the fake orders he was given. "Got orders to go lookin' for more stones. We've been up and down these canyons this last week and this ravine here looks to be the best chances we got." Pieter could tell nothing from the man's face, perhaps he bought the ruse and perhaps not.

The Death Marshal stared at Pieter for what seemed like an eternity. He had encountered Death Marshals before, but never when his goal was deception rather than destruction. He truly didn't know what to expect. There were stories of the Death Marshal's deductive powers, many exaggerated for certain, but some must be true. Pieter found himself wondering if the man could sense lies or read minds. Of course, that was ridiculous, but he may

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be able to perceive subtle eye and body movements that could give away the truth. Pieter took care to maintain control of himself while still looking just a little nervous, as that seemed appropriate.

Finally the Death Marshal spoke. "This is a dangerous area. You and your men should make your survey as quickly as possible. I recommend that you get back topside by nightfall." He handed the paperwork back to Pieter. "I hope the Union finds the deposits they are looking for, wouldn't want to run low. You have permission to walk the canyon, but the caves are under quarantine until further notice. Entrance is punishable by summary judgment."

Pieter tried to hide his sigh of relief as his men walked past. If the Death Marshal was suspicious of them at all he didn't show it. He instructed his men to spread out and start testing the walls for Soulstone deposits, loudly enough for the lawman to hear. Of course, it was all for show but it had to be done to maintain the cover. Pieter kept an eye on the Death Marshal until he had gone from view. Once he was certain they were no longer being overheard he called his men back into formation.

"They will no doubt be watching us. Make sure you keep the surveyor's box close. Take a tool any time you're going anywhere, they won't know what we do exactly." He took a tent spike and a small bag. As he moved up the wall slowly he chipped bits of canyon rocks into the sack.

They came around a corner and ahead of them was a cave. Even though it was more than fifty yards ahead, Pieter could tell this was the place. The air grew colder, frost forming over their metal canteens. The shadows in this area were even darker than in others. Yes, this was the place. His prize was so close now. His body trembled with anticipation. He scanned the area to make sure that they were alone then motioned to his men to head in. Their quest was nearing its end.

The guild rifleman at the top of the canyon flicked a small mirror twice to the north, and twice to the south. Death Marshal Hansen shook his head slowly, he hated being right.

The gaping entrance conjured images from Tara's nightmares of some ancient devouring beast. The chipped stalactites and stalagmites were canines flanking a smooth tongue-like path beaten into the dust by unknown explorers.

The cave's mouth yawned at Tara, swallowing light as she crept closer in the fading colors of an early evening sun. The air bit at her skin, much colder than she had expected. What little light fought its way into the ravine drained the warmth from her. That was ridiculous, of course. She was just imagining things, fueled by her exhaustion. Even so, she made a mental note to avoid going any further into the cave than she had to.

With her own senses in question, Tara almost didn't recognize the sound of men speaking. As the murmur of English grew louder, she snapped to her senses, quickly diving behind a small outcropping. She cursed her obvious footprints in the dirt, and prayed that they simply went unnoticed.

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Holding her breath, she listened to the soft words on the wind, but couldn't make out the words. The voices were coming no closer. Steeling her courage, Tara peered over the top of the outcropping, squinting into the dim silhouettes of men further down the ravine. The tell-tale duster of a Death Marshal gave little movement in the breeze, but it wasn't clear who he was speaking to.

She watched for a minute, curious about their sudden and timely appearance. If she had learned anything in her short life on the road it was that there were no coincidences. It was not by chance that they had all come to this place at this hour. This was fate.

Tara knew something about that. A fickle thing, fate had orphaned her young. It had forced her to survive years in the wilderness. Finally, it had made her a killer; first of outlaws, and then others. Perhaps everything she had endured, all of the hardships she had suffered in this hellhole had been preparation for this moment; everything leading up to this point. Maybe this was when she would welcome the reaper. Tara smiled, so long as she got paid along the way.

The Death Marshal left the miners, his shadow disappearing as he strode away, but he didn't stray far, keeping a suspicious eye on the newcomers. The other outlines separated from each other and casually moved along the walls. The men chipped with tools and upended odd vials onto the stone. She had no idea what they were doing, but she had seen miners and surveyors do their work before, and this wasn't it.

Suddenly one of the miners gestured to the others and began heading toward the cave, studying the ground along the way. Tara instantly knew her trail had been discovered. She cursed her exhaustion and silently aimed her pistol at the man. Of course, her shot would bring the other miners down on her instantly, but what else could she do? An idea struck her, and she grinned.

Tara aimed her pistol at the feint outline of the Death Marshal, now just a shadow. She aimed low. No need to kill, at least not just yet. Her shot rang out and ricocheted off the stones near the Marshal's feet.

In an instant the air was filled with hot chunks of metal as the Death Marshal opened fire on the miners, fanning his pistol. There was a flash in the distance and the miner on Tara's path dropped to the ground, motionless. Tara tried to note the position of the rifleman. As she began retreating into the cave, she saw the lead miner raise his hands and a feint glow filled the air.

Tara took one last look at the mouth of the cave before taking cover. "Better than a bullet…I hope," she muttered to herself. A small shudder ran down her spine as she imagined herself being swallowed whole. No doubt about it, the deja vu was unmistakable. She would meet death again, and soon.

She crouched low, taking care to remain out of direct lines of sight of the melee outside. From within her modest pack she produced an iron palm lamp, no bigger than a large man's fist. Its small reserve of oil sloshed a bit as she sparked flint onto the wick. With a comforting two-fold click the lantern's mirrored shutter and the thick hood fell into place. A small beam of yellow traced the cavern walls.

It wasn't what she expected. Natural stone usually had a smoothness to it from years of water wearing away hard edges. This was different; waves of rock coated the arched cavern like scales. As Tara gazed, she almost thought the patterns of rock began forming words.

She was strangely reminded of a street play she had seen as a small child where the actors had spoken English, but in such an unusual cadence she could hardly understand it. At first, the words drifted about as ripples on the cold stone. Red flashes burned on her retinas and traced the outlines on the wall. As Tara's eyes adjusted to the pattern, words began to form in her mind. No, not words so much as ideas.

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Curious notions on the borders of her reasoning, like hecklers in a crowd. They taunted her sanity, hurling thoughts like smooth stones.

It was a great emptiness. A song of sorrow and a rhyme of ruin. She saw great spheres whirling about her head, water crashing into small streams across their surface. The rivers became lakes, and then oceans. Ruddy brown mud pressed its way above the tiny surf. She began to count them, but the shifting appearance and the constant motion made for little certainty. Were there seven? Perhaps a dozen? No, thirteen? The counting pushed her consciousness down, begging her to sleep.

Then a frozen globe appeared above, ice forming over it in a white spreading web of crystals. It fell to the ground and shattered, each piece vanishing as mist. Another orb spun to reveal a sleeping face, it screamed, its eyes never opening. Tara covered her ears and dropped to a knee. It too plummeted into foggy nothingness.

Something brushed her arm. With a gasp Tara spun around on her heel, planting her free foot firmly to stop her motion. Before it registered as a thought, her pistol was in her hand, and the writing on the walls was gone. With a glance she counted her bullets; four of the six chambers were loaded.

Something had moved past her, deftly avoiding her lantern's bright beam. Could she make out something ahead? A shimmering in the darkness? No, the darkness itself. Her lantern light sputtered as she guided it over the form. Her eyes ached with the strain, and she could taste copper on the air.

The blackness took form. It wasn't like any man or monster she had seen. It was still difficult to discern among the shadows, but there was definitely a bulky torso of sorts, and spindly arms with unnatural bends. And a face, yes, certainly a face.

It was several minute before Tara realized her lantern had died. Despite the pitch, she stared directly into its eyes. It looked at her too, burning with hatred. The world around her had gone silent. She secretly hoped that the fighting would make its way into the cave now.

"Howdy?" her voice quavered as she spoke, and she instantly regretted pushing the interaction. In for a penny, in for a pound. "I'll have a beer."

Was that movement? Did it cock its head? It was impossible to tell. Tara mulled over her next move. She took one slow, deliberate step to her left. It didn't move, but even from her new position she viewed it as if it were still head on. She took a few more careful steps to the right. Without moving, it kept peering at her.

"No beer, eh? Soulstone ale then." Tara grinned nervously, then shrugged. "Suppose I have the wrong place, I'll get going then." She chastised herself for provoking it, but provoking things was what she did well.

"No Beer." It didn't speak. No sound came from a mouth. No, it was all the other sounds. Anything that wasn't those words was siphoned from the air, leaving only those two words in Tara's ears.

"Well, I reckon that will serve as progress." Tara gave a small smirk, maybe this wasn't the reaper after all. She tipped her hat, making sure to keep her eyes on the creature. There it was; the response she had hoped for. It bowed, ever so slightly, but she was sure she had seen it…

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Karina felt none of the awe others might as she looked out over the geological feature. It was just dust; yet more dust. Over a week across the vacant wilderness eating salty dried food and beating the dirt from her coat nightly left her unexcited about the prospect of delving down into more of it. Oh well, she thought, she had come this far, she wasn't going back empty handed.

She took out a notebook and drew up a quick sketch of the thing, noting its shape and sloping floor. She also made notes on some of its features, the rocky outcroppings and odd protrusions. She would designate this specimen a class one. On further consideration, she could imagine much simpler versions of this feature, such as a simple hole straight into the ground. That would be considered a class one. This ravine should be a class four. If she ever had occasion to see others, she would apply designations to them accordingly.

Karina looked down at her dress. It was ruined, covered in dust and sweat and, what was that? She didn't even want to know. She would have to buy a new one when she got back. She hated shopping almost as much as she hated the outdoors. The people in the shops were dirty, dirty little people in a dirty little world. She could smell the stench of the sweat seeping from them. The dead didn't smell; not if she prepared them properly.

"My pets, it is time we are finished. Into that hole, please." The handful of animated corpses shambled onward as directed, moving silently down the slope. Karina followed behind them, using them to make sure the trail was clear.

The old bite scar on Death Marshal Hansen's shoulder ached. His eyes tightened as he began to scan the horizon, and then the ridge line above him. Two vultures twisted in the air directly above him, gently circling his position. He was still a good hundred yards from the cave. It couldn't be something inside.

The bullet split a small rock near his foot with a high pitched ping. His thick boots protected him from the bits of shrapnel as the sound of the discharge caught up to the bullet. He spun on the surveyors; he knew they were up to something. His pistol leapt into his hand and he looked for the leader; hoping to chop the head from the serpent. He fanned his pistol, filling the air with lead to keep his targets pinned, and then quickly reloaded.

Hansen didn't have a clean view of his primary target. He began walking steadily forward, and leveled his pistol at one of the men armed with a pick. He aimed his pistol; a single shot tore the man's throat open, spraying red on the canyon wall. He pointed a finger from his free hand at an older surveyor with a thick beard. He clicked his thumb down, and with that motion his target's head exploded like a bottle of wine dropped to the floor. A second later the rifle report from above filled the air.

That's when he saw the real threat. Their leader's hands began to sputter with light, sparks of malevolent power swirling around his outstretched fingers. The sounds of a woman chanting filled his ears. Were there two of them? Lightning knocked him off his feet. Damn, there are two of them.

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A bluish fog began to blanket the floor of the canyon, rapidly filling it to a man's height. His rifleman couldn't help him now. He stood up, scanning the area for the greatest threat. He could just make out the sparks of blue light in the fog, the sorcerer's hands, most likely. Hansen took slow aim with his pistol, focusing on the point between the glowing orbs of electricity.

He squeezed the trigger. The lights fell to the floor and winked out. A small pool of pale blue electricity spilled out onto the ground and left the air tasting of copper.

A blow from behind knocked him of his footing, but he managed to stay standing. He felt a warm rivulet of blood slide down his neck. He wheeled around on the ball of one foot.

The body of the man standing before him had seen better days. His sunken cheeks peeled away in parts to reveal yellow teeth cracked into jagged spikes. His hair had torn away in clumps, and his fingertips rotted away to the sharpened bone. Hansen had seen worse. If he counted the zombies in the fog correctly, he was outnumbered four to one. Four bullets left… he'd have to be perfect.

Hansen didn't like those odds. He squinted his gaze at the closest zombie. His upper lip pulled up in a snarl. A growl rolled from his throat. The flames began in his eyes, filling his sockets with roiling inferno. It spread across his face, pushing light from beneath his skin, and igniting into flame. The illumination grew; his skull luminous through his flesh.

The Death Marshal's voice bellowed through the ravine. Somewhere in the zombie's brains, beneath the decay and neglect, his voice took root. Under the rotted gray matter that once comprised a mind, some semblance of humanity, some shred of what was once good and decent awoke for one brief moment. As Hansen stood before them, purifying fire engulfing him, the zombies remembered what fear was. And the horror of what they had become paralyzed them.

Hansen took his time with every shot, wasting no bullets and ending each one.

Karina felt each one die; the power she had invested in them leeching out and away. It wasn't hard to spot him; his power was like a lighthouse in the fog. Her soft soled shoes provided little noise as she moved across the hard packed ground. Karina was thankful she had taken the impractical things on this journey, even if it meant her zombies carrying her much of the way.

Karina watched as the Death Marshal's fire cooled, and receded into him. He fell to a knee, breathing heavily. This man had just ruined her darlings. He had taken something wonderful and made it shameful of its own perfection. Worse, she now had to take matters into her own hands.

Bent over, gasping for air, the Death Marshal reloaded his gun, bullet by bullet. It was a dirty, messy thing that came next. Karina detested it, but he had left her little choice. She gripped a stone with two hands and held it above her head. Gravity pulled down, her arms locked at the elbows, swinging in a wide arc. She looked away and held her eyes tightly shut as the heavy rock split his skull open.

This dress was now truly beyond repair.

She plucked a bit of thread from the hem of her skirt and tied it around his finger. With a deep breath

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and a push from her centered self, oily tendrils grasped at his body like puppet strings. His eyes opened, unfocused and dull. Karina tugged her right hand up, and he stood, his head lolling to one side to look more through her than at her.

"I don't have time to fix you now my new darling. Walk a thousand paces from the mouth of the hole, then wait with the vultures." She gave him a pat on the head, and regretted it as the gore stained her glove.

She picked up his Peacebringer, and the two parted ways. He shambled down the ravine as she strode confidently into the mouth of the cavern.

Pieter could smell something he didn't like. Beneath the gunpowder hanging in the still air, it stank. A bit like half cooked tripe. Pieter never liked tripe.

The mist had grown so thick that Pieter couldn't see his hand held in front of his face. It was cold though, or at least, his legs were cold. His mouth felt hot, and wet. His hand was heavy, it took effort to hold it in place. As the fog started to roll its way from the canyon, he could just make out his hand. Just barely a shadow at first. He flexed it, fist to open palm. It was still so heavy.

And covered in blood.

It was some time before Pieter woke up. His dreams were flashes of violence. Stuttering moments of a pistol echo, conjured lightning, and a man in a leather duster refusing to be swatted away by the sky itself. When Pieter finally returned to the lands of the waking, he wished for those stolen nightmares to return.

It didn't look good, but it didn't feel like anything at all. His shirt was soaked in blood, damply clinging to his abdomen. He tried to wriggle his feet, but they refused his commands. He'd seen a miner crushed nearly to death once; this bore an eerily similarity. Years gone, the memory was still so fresh; it kept him up some nights.

The dowsers had been so sure, a huge vein of soulstone just beyond the rock. They weren't wrong, of course, they never were. The price of one miner had been a small exchange for such riches. Something with the way the stone cracked, or maybe the dynamite hadn't been placed properly. The explosion rocked the tunnels, and at first everyone believed it had gone as planned. But Pieter found the man, hours later, in a small side passage.

It had come down quickly, pinning Laurence down with a large wooden beam beneath a dozen boulders. It had pinched him at the waist. He hadn't died. Pieter called in the closest thing to a doctor he could find. The dentist had never seen anything like it. He figured that the stones kept all the blood in place; stopped Laurence from bleeding out. At best, he had a few days like this,

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before he expired of thirst, or hunger.

Pieter had found Laurence's wife and children. They had a tearful farewell as Pieter listened from around a corner. Then the rocks were moved, and the mining resumed.

It smelled the same now, from beneath Pieter's shirt. He closed his eyes, and exhaled, and accepted that he was about to die. Here in the ravine, so far from anyone who would cry over him.

Pieter drifted back into unconsciousness, for how long he did not know. Perhaps a few minutes, or was it days? His eyes grimly focused on objects around the canyon. His tools, the bodies of his crew, and the corpses of zombies. The thick fog had cleared. That's when he first saw his salvation. His eyes focused softly on the green glow. Behind the body of one of his crew was a bullet hole. The Death Marshal hadn't been a perfect shot. It throbbed, a dull green light spilling out of the tiny round dent in the stone.

Pieter leaned forward and it hurt. It hurt like nothing he had ever felt before, deep in his guts. He closed his eyes and imagined nothing; a perfect blackness of calm. He thought it might have been that which wasn't before existence. Then he thought of a single light. A tiny dot in the darkness that spread, engulfing him in pure white light.

He pulled himself along the dirt by his hands and elbows, the thoughts of pre-existence pushing away the worst of the pain. It felt odd. Some part of him knew that he was trailing something behind. He could hear it dragging along the dirt like wet rope. He could feel it too, as if something were standing on his stomach. It was an odd sensation to hear something a few steps away that he could feel in his belly.

He forced the thoughts away with eyes tightly closed and more light, throbbing in time to the suffering. Looking back would only shatter his resolve. His hand brushed stone. He opened his eyes and focused on the soft glow. It wasn't high above him, maybe five feet off the ground.

It took all he had to pull himself up. He knelt on something damp and coiling, but he looked only upwards. He stretched his arm as high as it would go; the tip of his middle finger bushed the outer most edge of the bullet hole. Then the tip of his finger, almost to the end of the nail, slid in. He pulled himself by his finger, straining in his arm, pulling his weight up. His free hand clutched at the wall, finding brief grip. He touched the smooth glassy soulstone, for only a brief second.

That was all he needed. The magic of the stone tore down his arm and into his chest. It rolled like thunder into his intestines and spine. It filled him with regret, sorrow, and wholeness.

It was a few moments before Pieter decided to stand. He pulled his shirt away, the soaked cloth clung to his stomach. A round white scar puckered just above his navel. In the dirt, a finger thin

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line of blood and wetness lead from a small pool of blood to where he was now standing. Had he dragged his innards that far? He decided to not think about it. Light and darkness pushed the thoughts from his mind.

He held his hand, fingers curled to touch his palm. It shook a moment, with the exertion, and then allowed the dark calmness to flow from his outstretched arm and into the canyon wall. The stone burst from its timeless sleeping place, scattering around in a blast of debris and dust that dared not to touch Pieter.

He'd never seen a soulstone like this one. Most were round, worn smooth by time perhaps. This stone was long and jagged. About as long as a man's arm. It tapered at one end to a sharp point, and the entire thing came to a ragged edge all long its length. Pieter wrapped his bloody shirt around the blunt end and pulled it free from the stone. It didn't burn as brightly now, but the feint light was there.

He held out the soulstone like a sword, the pre-creation light flowing through his arms and down the blade. The ravine wall began to tremble. The golem burst from the stone, summoned by his will alone. It was a head taller than a man, and as wide as an ox cart. It slowly turned its head towards its master with the sound of tumbling rocks.

Pieter grinned. It was a smile without joy. It was the expression of a man who found terrible humor in the darkness within himself. Pieter stalked towards the cave entrance, his servant followed a few steps behind him.

The nothing-beast, as Tara had begun to think of it, still stared at her. Without a light source the darkness of the cave was a heavy weight. She couldn't remember the last time she had been anywhere with such little light. She could touch her face without seeing her hand, as if she were blind. Despite this, the nothing-beast was clearly visible, a black shadow a dozen paces from her.

HELP ME It was that same odd noise, not speech at all. No, the background noise was devoured, stripping everything but those words. She could hear her heartbeat and the blood rushing through her veins as the stone used to chisel those words.

Disturbing as that was, she had more questions for the nothing-beast than she could possibly ask in a lifetime. "What are you?"

OBLITERATION

"That's not an answer I expected. I'm going to make light now. Will that trouble you?"

YOU CANNOT

"I'm sure I can make out how to get the lantern burning."

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It burns

Tara felt the glass of her lantern, it was warm. Despite the wick's best efforts, no illumination spilled forth. "Well I'll be damned."

Yes

The bellow of the Peacebringer was unmistakable. Tara had been in several taverns when the Death Marshal's raided, and they weren't shy about taking a life. She had learned to fear the distinctive sound of the weapon. She spun out of instinct, before she remembered that she wouldn't be able to see anyone.

Another You will help me as well

"I find that doubtful," said a woman's voice. Tara held her breath, and desperately tried to silence her breathing. She turned her ears to pinpointing the lady. She knew it was a lady. She could hear the gentle swishing of her dress on the ground and her speech had a sharp clip of confidence.

Why else would you have come

"I was told to come here, there is something here I want. Although they were quite cryptic."

Enter the endless labyrinth

The nothing-beast moved, as if opening a door. Tara could hear the sound of stone grinding on the floor. The woman spoke again, was she growing agitated? "I've no time for games. I require a bath, a laundry, and then another bath."

Enter the endless labyrinth

"And just how long will that take?" Tara already hated this woman. She'd known her type her entire life. The nothing-beast, to this woman, wasn't a mysterious new creature in the universe. It was simply the gatekeeper to whatever this lady believed she deserved.

Eternity does not enter here

"What's in this Labryinth?" Tara controlled her audible shock at the usefulness of the question. The nothing-beast seemed to ponder the question for a moment.

The Will of Obliteration

"Now that sounds like something that makes all the road dust worth it." Tara could hear the woman walking. If her ears weren't deceiving her, the woman passed withing a few feet, and then stopped, maybe a man's height away. "It seems my eyes are not adjusting to the dark. Am I expected to bumble about this labyrinth?"

The nothing-beast just looked at her. A small sliver of dull green throbbed a doorway into being. The light scattered on the floor like marbles, stopping a few hand widths from the nothing-beast. "Much better," chirped the woman. Tara got a good look at the lady; her dressed caked in blood and frayed from dragging on the ground. The lady slipped into the green doorway and it shut behind her.

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"What do you mean, by that? Eternity does not enter here?" Tara's curiosity had all but overridden her fear.

TIME IS NOT WITHOUT AS WITHIN

"So if I go in, how long will it feel like to me? No time passes outside?"

LIKE AN IRIS IT PULLS TIGHTER IN THE SUN

"Prose? Really? Now you start getting creative? So I could be in there a hundred years and a few days or hours passes outside?"

YES

"That sounds like it could drive a person crazy."

THE MIND DOES NOT NEED TO EMERGE WITH THE BODY

"That doesn't sound good." Tara thought hard about her next question. There were a thousand running through her head, but how much could it truly understand? How much could it even answer?

HELP ME

"That isn't a request, is it?"

NO

Another door opened, the same light green tossed across the floor. This burst hit Tara's eyes painfully. It was meant for her to enter. She took a deep breath. "I have more questions."

NO

Tara almost didn't recognize that the cave was beginning to brighten around her. She pulled near her doorway, the telling pulse of radiance bobbed as someone carrying a large soulstone came down from the entrance of the cave.

Tara slipped into the passage as she caught a glimpse of a rather large stone man rounding the corner, his body lit by a jagged soulstone carried by one of the miners.

Tara had seen a lot of strange things in the last few decades. She had wondered the maze itself for what seemed like months. It took her a while to realize she wasn't getting hungry or tired. It had been weeks, but she hadn't once thought to eat or sleep. This made her heavy sack of supplies less useful, and she began using the various dried beans and hard tack to mark where she had been. That's when she started making progress on the labyrinth itself.

Emerging from the stone was a relief at first. There was a small glade of gnarled and twisted trees. Then there was a desert, and an ocean. She had built a ship; that had taken quite a while. She had sailed the calm sea on a gentle breeze, she had climbed mountains of bone and ash. She had done all of this under a black and starless sky.

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She had wondered alone all those decades before she met the mad woman and the demon bridge. She had passed the bodies of men she didn't recognize. They had killed each other; oriental blades and arrows through vital organs. The only conversation was years gone now, it had been with a monster that called itself Shimmer. She had lost her boat when she killed it.

She recognized the woman from another lifetime, when she had listened to her blather on with the nothing-beast and then passed into this world minutes before her. Where the bridge met the side of the chasm, there was fist clutching the stone walls. Not a fist, but a building shaped like a clutching hand. A massive arm, wide enough to drive four wagons side by side, extended across the gap. The demon hung there, holding the other side as well. There was no bottom to the chasm; it extended down as far as she could see.

"Well, fancy meeting you here." Tara's voice cracked, she rarely used it these days.
Karina just sat in the dirt and stared at her.

SHE CANNOT ANSWER said the bridge in that instantly recognizable voice.

"How long has she been here?"

FOR HER A HUNDRED LIFETIMES HAVE PASSED

"Well, that explains that. I've been talking to myself for years."

YOU ARRIVED QUICKLY YOU ARE STILL THE WOMAN YOU KNOW

"It surely doesn't feel that way. I came in here to save you, didn't I?"

YES

"And how do you reckon that happens?"

TAKE FROM THIS PRISON A PIECE OF ME

"That's a long trip back.

YES

"And then what happens?"

THIS PRISON WILL CEASE

"I've lived here longer than anywhere else. I like this place."

I DO NOT WHEN I WAS FIRST PLACED WITHIN THE PRISON MY KEEPERS THOUGHT TO CONTAIN ME I RAGED I TORE AT THE PRISON I HAMMERED AT IT FROM WITHIN IT BEGAN TO BREAK IT TOOK AN EON FOR ME TO MAKE THAT SMALL HOLE WITHIN MY CAGE BUT I HAD BENT THE BAR THE PRISON WOULD COLLAPSE AND I WOULD DIE WITH IT

I HAVE BEEN FORCED TO PRESERVE MY PRISON I HAVE HELD THESE TWO SIDES TOGETHER FOR AN ETERNITY

I AM OBLITERATION I AM THAT WHICH DEFIES I HAVE LEARNED MY LESSONS I WISH TO WALK BENEATH THE

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SKIES OF WORLDS THAT WERE NOT CREATED FOR MY DESTRUCTION TAKE EVEN THE SMALLEST PIECE OF ME FROM THIS PLACE AND WHEN I RELEASE THESE WALLS I WILL WALK THE WORLD WITH YOU

"Well," Tara pulled a large knife from her pack and began chipping away at the claw the size of a horse, "I guess we better get moving."

Tara held the glistening piece of obsidian in her palm. She simply watched as it expanded; segments folding over each other like the scales of a great serpent, until her right hand was encased. Her new fingers ended in sharpened points and she tapped the tips together idly.

"Interesting."

DO NOT FEAR. YOU ARE THE VESSEL. The voice was in Tara's head now. No, not a voice, a thought; or the absence of any thoughts, but those words.

"I've lived a might too long to be afraid now. Shall we go, then?"

YES. ONCE AGAIN I WILL LOOK UPON THE SKY.

Tara turned and grabbed Karina by the hand. "Come on, now. Time to go up into the world again." Karina followed obediently, her wide eyes darting from side to side as she left the only home she could now remember.

As they crossed the bridge, it fell away behind them. The earth groaned and the skies began to grow dark. The great seas dried as the whole world was softly swallowed by oblivion.

Tara blinked and shook her head as she emerged once more into the cave. The light was different here, and it was difficult to adjust. Luckily, she was aware enough to notice the giant stone hurtling towards her face.

Tara rolled to the side as the golem's fist smashed into the side of the cave, showering her with fragments of rock. She held out the obsidian claw and spoke in a voice that was not hers, **YOU ARE NOT NEEDED.**

The golem was gone. There was no explosion. No shattering of stone, no crumbling to dust. The golem had simply ceased to be. Tara took a deep breath and smiled. "Obliteration," she whispered as she admired the tips of her clawed hand. Raising her head, Tara noticed a man standing behind where the golem had been. He had a glowing sword of soulstone gripped tightly in his shaking fingers. He looked familiar, a face from another lifetime.

The man slowly lowered his blade to the floor of the cave and began backing away, before turning and breaking into a full sprint. Tara simply shrugged and brushed the shards of stone from her coat as he fled. She walked over to the sword lying on the ground and picked it up, admiring its qualities. This might come in handy.

Tara looked back one last time before venturing into the outside world for the first time in a thousand years. She gazed up at the stars and reached out with her clawed hand. "Even the sky could be ours," she whispered.

There was a crack, and a flash. What was this feeling? She searched her memories until she found it. Pain. This was pain. Tara looked down at the gaping red hole in her chest as she dropped to her knees. The obsidian claw slid from her hand and fell to the ground beside her. Giving a half smile, Tara sank to the ground.

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Up on the ridge, rifleman Hawkins loaded another round into the chamber before putting his eye back to the scope. The woman most certainly looked dead.

He panned over until he could see where the obsidian claw had fallen. He sighed. “I should probably go pick that up,” he grumbled. “Putting in for a raise when I get back.”

Karina had been in the cave for hours, afraid of this strange world. Her head was swimming with the sound and confusion. She couldn’t understand any of it, but somewhere in the back of her mind a familiar urge told her to move. She crawled on her hands and knees through the dark.

When she finally found her way, she saw the body. It was the lady who had helped her escape. For the first time in centuries, some distant relative to a memory began to yawn and stretch in the darkest recess of her mind.

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