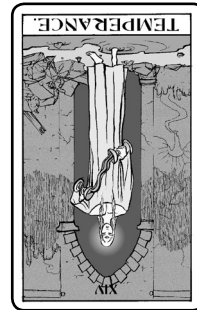
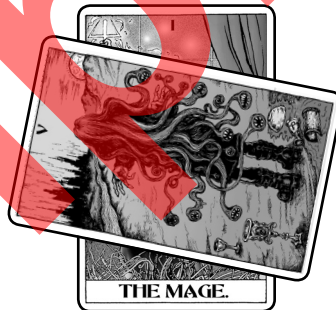
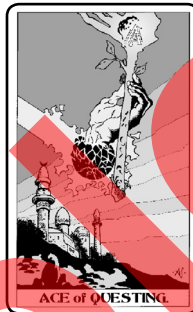


BEYOND THE BARRIERS:  
the BOOK  
of WORLDS™



And all embraced in skylight  
Or wreathed in fatal shade...

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# Prelude

**By Kathleen Ryan**

Deep in the Umbra, somewhere between the Horizon Realm Shangri-La and Pluto's second moon Cerberus, Amanda walks. In her hands is a silver cord, strong and light, stretching behind and before her for as far as she can see. The minutes pass into hours, but she follows it patiently, knowing that at the end of the walk is home, knowing that her friends keep the path secure for her.

The thread snaps.

Quick as thought, the shield magicks drop, and Amanda falls free in the void.

In the first startled second, the vacuum catches at her breath, and the only air in a million miles escapes her. The water in her breath freezes before her eyes.

Blood spurts from her ears as the drums rupture, and then the silence steals even her heartbeat. More slowly, her skin burns, reddens, bruises blue, the capillaries bursting into space. She fights nausea and loses, retching and kicking, her hair floating forward into the mess. Gasping, she curls up, eyes shut, knuckles clenched white around the useless, broken cord.

She starts to drown.

At the edge of panic, the young mage ransacks her mind and memory, hunting anything, everything she has ever known, heard or thought about breathing the Ether. Frantically she builds a wall of logic, a chain of reason to bind her lungs to her bidding — and chokes on nothing. She commands, shouting to herself (and her terrified

Avatar) *believe or die!* But desperation is no substitute for faith, and her chest is empty still, smoldering fire. Near the end, near unconsciousness, as the flame in her lungs flares into her brain, Amanda screams in silent, throat-tearing rage, maddened that the universe should dare disobey her.

*It will be as I want it,* she thinks more calmly, and laughs, breathing easily.

Now she straightens, turning slightly clockwise and end-over-end, drifting in a gentle wind. Her Avatar manifests before her. The bloody-handed angel is trembling, wings wrapped protectively around herself. Only her little-girl face shows, terrified and pale.

*We're safe?* The angel asks, hesitantly.

*We're dead.*

Reeling in the useless thread, the mortal half of the mage studies the endless sky, but sees no planets, no Realms, no movement. The sun's disc is very small; she knows that the Horizon must be too far away to run to or signal.

*But we breathe. We live.*

Amanda swings her bag around, sending her body spinning in the opposite direction. She stops it against her knees, slowing the spin, and finds her face next to the spirit's feet.

*We're still dying,* she says plainly. *You and the rest of my soul are going to disintegrate in about six hours.*

She opens her bag just enough for one hand to enter, fumbles through the floating contents. A rubber band ties back her hair, a wrinkled handkerchief mops up her ears and face, a few packets of crackers go into her back pocket on a whim — Amanda almost smiles at the thought of this last meal.

The letter she was to deliver to Senex is still there. She moves it carefully to a zippered panel of her jacket, in the hopes that her body will be easier to find than her bag.

*Won't the others come looking for us?* The angel asks, pleadingly.

*Maybe. If they know the thread's been cut. If it wasn't cut because Cerberus is under attack. If we don't drift so far that even the Old Man can't find us.*

At last she finds what she wants: an old pair of opera glasses wrapped in a spare shirt.

*What do we do?* The angel is close to tears, now.

Stuffing the shirt back into the duffel, the mortal's hand grazes the hilt of one of her spare knives, an ancient bowie with a razor-sharp blade — a present from the Old Man. Amanda grasps it tightly, longing for the safety of her mentor's study on Cerberus, and pulls it free of the bag. She straps the knife around her waist, double-checking the thin loop of leather holding it in its

sheath, knowing that she will have to kill herself — to free her Avatar before the six hours are up — if the angel is to survive. Once more she looks to the sun, wondering where and when the Old Man will come looking for the angel again, what kind of body might hold her. She turns back and finds the Avatar's eyes on the knife, but the bloody-handed angel says nothing.

*We watch, and wait, and try to arrange a signal.* Amanda shuts the bag, slings it, and settles back, scanning patiently for any sign of life.

*There,* Amanda says, *pointing to a patch of blackness near the angel's right foot. Sunward, coming closer.*

She rotates once more around, easing her free hand forward, her left leg out and back, killing her momentum. The tiny gray pinpoint becomes a tiny gray cloud, then faint specks of light in a tight formation.

The Avatar drifts forward, wings barely moving. Her face is still troubled. *What is it?* she asks.

*Doesn't matter. We've only got three hours left.*

*It moves so slowly.*

*That's an illusion. It's moving so fast it won't see us as it goes by — assuming it has eyes and comes anywhere near us.*

*How are we going to signal it?*

Amanda looks her soul up and down, then extends an open hand.

*Come closer, and I'll show you.*

The angel smiles weakly, drifts back to her mage, and puts her delicate, ivory-white and crimson fingers in Amanda's callused fist. Without a word, the Euthanatos yanks on the spirit's outstretched arm, pulling her in, flattening her sideways, slamming into the folded wings and twisting the arm up and behind, past the point of pain, near breaking. The Avatar shrieks, and the sound fills space and echoes in Amanda's silent skull. As the angel screams, the faint light of her explodes in an eye-shattering nova, and the mortal lets go in agony.

Even before she can see again, Amanda's thoughts are on the glasses, and her left hand snatches them to her face while the right is still twitching with pain. The pinpoint stars have scattered; some are missing, but the half-dozen remaining are speeding straight for the fading light.

*It worked.* Amanda glances over to her wounded Avatar, pats the angel's hair gently. *It's all right now.*

The angel begins to cry.

Amanda raises the opera glasses again. The little moving stars slowly show discs, clarify into six pairs of glowing yellow eyes, bright but still very small and distant. The first pair come close enough to show a body behind them, and Amanda flinches as the tiny skull attached

to those eyes drops out of focus and bumps its nose into her right lens.

Too surprised to keep hold of the glasses, she lets them drift out of her reach, studying the newcomers — six or seven mouse-shaped skeletons with intense golden lights for eyes. They scurry around Amanda and the angel, running steady on a plane she cannot see.

The young mage digs into her pocket for the crackers, black and blue fingers clumsy on the cellophane. She hands a few to the angel.

*See if they like these*, she says, and begins to throw odds and ends from her bag. Pens, keys and knives spin out in all directions as she maneuvers herself parallel to the mice. They fidget around her, nibbling at her hair and jacket, crawling into her pockets whenever her spin brings them above the spirits' "floor." Finally she stops turning. With her head and shoulders securely above the ground, she wills herself to grab hold of it, and pulls herself up as easily as out of a swimming pool.

For the first time, she sees that the void around them is not empty — along the mice's course there is a trail, a faint gray line in a dusty black plain. She turns to her Avatar, realizes that her soul has been standing on this plane all along.

Now the mice have swarmed up the angel. Her wings are open, and though her cheeks are still wet, the tears have stopped. Two bony noses peek out from her hair, one mouse perches on her right wing, three on her left, and in her good left hand the last two are munching on saltines, the crumbs falling through their empty ribs. She bites her lip and frowns.

Amanda, guiltily unwrapping another pack of crackers, leans forward to try to soothe her. The mice duck their heads in and hide from her, running to the other side of her Avatar, huddling in the hollow of the wings.

*I want to go home*, the angel whimpers, and begins to cry again.

The mice perk up their heads as she speaks, and twitch nervously in the shadow, eyes dancing. A moment later, they stream out in single-file, and the last in line lifts its tail to the angel, beckoning with its forepaw for her to take it. Fearfully, she reaches forward — Amanda catches her other hand only just in time — and the mice race off with the angel and her mage crawling along behind them, faster than sound.

The sun is only a pinpoint itself when the mice stop, but Pluto and Cerberus are nowhere in sight. The line breaks up as the spirits confer, skulls shaking nervously around their leader, and in great agitation they run — first under the Avatar's wings, then behind Amanda's boots, then darting back along the trail sunward.

*What the hell?* Amanda curses, checking her watch. There is only one hour left, and she reaches slowly and bitterly for the old Bowie knife.

*Wait.* A voice — two voices? — echoes in her head.

The young mage looks up in confusion to the angel (collapsed in a feathery heap before her), then past the pale spirit to a darkness storming up the path, swallowing the stars behind it.

The darkness comes closer, and faintly now Amanda sees the rider: Mitzi Zimmerman, the Old Man's second-in-command. She guides her huge steed with a simple rope halter, brings it to a standstill in front of them, and still the horse is darkness, solid and graceful, eyeless and eerily undefined.

*Nice to find you alive, Amanda. I thought I was looking for a corpse.*

Mitzi dismounts, unties the halter. The darkness dissipates, and black saddlebags fall to the ground.

*Do you still have the thread with you?*

Amanda reaches into her bag, pulls it out for the older woman to see. Mitzi takes it and examines it carefully, end to end, and tosses it over her shoulder, where it disappears.

*All right. This is how it is.* She pulls a small glass jar from her pocket, hands it to Amanda. *Put a little of this in each ear, and rub it on all the skin you can get to now. You can do a more thorough job later, when you have time.*

Amanda obeys, and Mitzi continues aloud in her quiet, firm voice. "You can't go back to Cerberus now. This thread was cut from there, and either we have to clean house or the Hermetic refugees do. I'm hoping it's a just misguided assassination attempt, and not something more serious, but... there it is. Someone back home is out to get you.

"While I'm thinking about it, do you have the letter from Scherer?" She accepts it, throws it over her other shoulder, and goes on.

"The plan is, you go back to the alchemist's shop, keep quiet, and we'll call for you in about a week. I've brought enough clothes and things to get you by for that long — I really am so pleased you survived! — and Scherer's apprentice can help you with anything I've forgotten."

"I don't think they're going to want me back."

"Why not?" Mitzi hands Amanda the saddlebags, and starts twisting the rope into a different pattern.

"I killed a man in Scherer's workshop."

"Oh. Shit... Who was it?"

"Richard Somnitz." She pauses, remembering. "Of the House of Helekar, they said."