

Fall From Grace



Year of the
DAMNED

A Character Sourcebook for Hunter: The Reckoning[®]

Much as it injures my pride to have to confess such a lapse, I have stumbled off the path and fallen into Light. It sears and scorches the will out of me, so that I no longer even regret what I have lost. The memory of that regret — or its phantom — remains, however. I have spoken before, or will speak in times to come, of the way that time is twisted and coiled. The past and future crowd me now at all times, as vivid and painful as the present. Memories and visions, they have tooth and claw as vicious as any skin-changer.

At the bottom of the United Kingdom, my protégé — just a little damaged by his misadventures — led me to a place of significant power. Chancetonbury Ring is in the county of Sussex. It is a lonely hilltop, crowned by a circle of trees, that the locals say is beloved of the Enemy, Satan Himself. To get to





it, you have to walk a long way up a winding forest path and then across a ridge, far beyond the easy touch of the modern world. The legends say that those who stay the night will attract the Enemy's curiosity. He will come to them, and their fate will depend entirely on His mood, for the Ring is a place that the divine does not touch. We went there, spent the night among the trees, and in the small hours of the morning, the Darkness came for me.

I resisted His temptations.

It was not easy. My quest has been long and wearying and has taken me to many strange places. The Darkness did not speak to me, nor did He identify Himself. He approached me through my powers. I was offered clarity of sight to look back to the very beginning, to finally discover the truth of what we are and where we began. The vision was there in the

back of my mind, waiting for me to turn my attention to it for an instant. I knew it as surely as I knew my own mind. A lesser man might have snatched at the power, but if there is one thing that I have learned from my native home, it is that there is always a price, and that the highest prices are the ones you cannot see. My soul is not for purchase.

When the Darkness lost interest in me and went elsewhere, William subsided into compulsive vomiting. I realized only then that he had been shrieking in pain the whole time of my visitation. He recovered by the time dawn broke, and although weak, he was able to walk.

Later, the Shining Ones showed me how I might attain the same reaches of power — a route of considerable exertions. My vision had never led me falsely, and it did not occur to me that I might be required to sacrifice my Self.



whose side are you on? It may be the most important question there is.

There is a vast, empty plain, gray with the mixed dust of ashes and powdered bones. It sits behind my eyes, behind my mind. It is immense and ancient. No human will ever walk it, yet we are all there, all of the chosen. This is where gods come to die. It is time once again for the fight. We are called to battle, my brothers and sisters. The forces of Light and Darkness are fierce and implacable, deadly in their hatred of each other. They have fought a thousand times before, and will fight a thousand times again. We are pieces in their deadly game.

whose side are you on? Light or Darkness?

Dare you reject both and side with humanity?

The third option is not one that our lords and masters like to draw attention to, but you do not have to betray your own. You can refuse to accept orders and decrees, missions and quests, temptations and devotions. There is a route to the highest orders of power within all of us. It is part of the process that makes us what we are, perhaps. I feel certain that if the Shining Ones could close it to us, then they would. They are like an over-protective father, unwilling to let his child develop independence.

This third way requires sacrifices. Of course it does. But one has to let go of distractions to become truly focused. By striving within, you may find the path to realize your potential and play your full role in the drama to come. Then you will be able to do as your conscience and true will dictate, for you will still have conscience, which the Darkness would not leave you, and you will still have true will, which is not permitted when one serves the Light. I know, for I can see it in my memories and visions. The Shining Ones showed me the way and I followed — and have become a follower as a result.

The phantom of what I once was is powerful, though, as once my will was. It feeds itself to me, giving me strength, allowing these words I write. Each of them eats a little of it, however, and soon I will put down this pen as my masters require and write no more, for there will be no more of me left. The embers of an old fire smol-

der in my soul, and they kindle enough rebellion for this last act of disobedience.

Pay heed. The last shards of my independence burn away so that you may hear this last and greatest warning. There is always a price. It is unavoidable. But you may choose who to pay: the Darkness, the Shining Ones or yourself.



PROLOGUE: LAST CRUSADE

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.*

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was a bright, almost painful blue. The flowers in full spring glory seemed to radiate their own light, and the sun beat down with cheerful warmth.

It was a beautiful day for a funeral, but the few guests at the service weren't outside in the fresh air. They were in the crematorium.

The lone woman was wearing a black dress that was a little small on her. It fell awkwardly to her mid-shin and was tight across the shoulders. It had belonged to the girl going into the flames.

The man wore a black suit with the too-sharp creases of pure polyester. He stood at rigid attention, brow furrowed, with a rosary wound between his fingers.

The only other people present were the priest, who didn't know either of the mourners, and the attendant who operated the furnace.

The priest seemed to hurry through the service. Usually people didn't watch the coffin go into the flames, but the man, Wendell, had insisted. The room was small, concrete, utilitarian. There wasn't even a podium, so the priest had to hold his Bible.

Afterward, the woman, whose name was Justine, asked Wendell if he wanted the ashes.

"I thought we should scatter them, just to be safe," he said. She sighed.

When they got back to his van, he pulled off his jacket and put on a shapeless, oversized windbreaker. It hid his shoulder holster much better than the suit coat did.

"So what now?" Justine asked.

"Tactically or strategically?"

"Oh for God's sake...."

"Tactically, we go back to the hotel so that you can gather your things. Strategically, we continue against the unholy filth that claimed our comrade."

"Wendell, they're *all dead*. Do you even remember freaking out? Screaming, 'God hates you'? You blew them all to pieces with that stuff, that C4."

"That was just one nest. There are more."

"You're not even going to take a break and mourn Karla?"

"The best way I can mourn her is by avenging her."

"Yeah, I'm *sure* that's what she'd want."

Wendell had been about to start the van, but he turned to the woman instead of turning the key.

"What's that mean?" he said.

"Just that monster hunting was *your* crusade, not hers."

"Clearly, it became hers as well."

"Oh sure. When you throw someone in the mud, they get muddy," Justine said.

"Do you think she wanted *them* to survive once she knew the truth?"

"Of course not. But I'm guessing *she* wanted to survive."

Wendell slammed the dashboard and Justine jumped. She'd seen his temper before and she almost backed off, but not this time. The bright sunlight made the whole situation seem surreal. The uncomfortable dress made her cranky. And she missed Karla, who had become her friend.

"It's better to die knowing the salvation of Christ—"

"That's your answer for *everything*. She was better off dying a Christian at 19 than living to—?"

"Yes! It's better to die a Christian — at *any* age! You think I don't regret it? You think I'm not in torment, wondering how I could have saved her?"

"I'll tell you how you could have saved her. You could have let her go instead of recruiting her into your 'army'!"

"What do you mean, 'let her go'? You make it sound like she was a captive."

"Wasn't she? No money, hundreds of miles from home, no job. What was she supposed to do? Especially with you scaring the crap out of her all the time, telling her about bloodsucker this and rot that."

"I told her the truth!"

"What a big favor. In case you hadn't noticed, the truth *sucks*. Lots of people are perfectly happy without knowing it."

"Like you wanted to be?" Wendell said.

"Yeah! I know I can't go back, but that doesn't mean I don't *want* to. She could have. She could have dropped out and lived a real life!"

"She would have been hooking again within a month."

Justine slapped him. For a moment, she saw his nostrils flare and his pupils dilate, and realized that she'd gone too far. He lunged across the seat. She was fast enough to get her arms and legs between them, but he was strong, hysterically strong. In an instant, he had her legs pinned against her chest and her wrists caught in a crushing grip. She tried to kick him in the crotch, but she couldn't move.

He shifted to do... something. To grip both her wrists in one hand, so he could hit or strangle her with the other? Desperate, Justine tried words.

"Karla told me you hit her once, too."

It worked.

Like the plug pulled from a bathtub, all the anger drained out of him. He eased back behind the steering wheel.

"Wendell," she said carefully, "I'm going now."

He nodded. She opened her mouth, closed it, then said, "Look... I know you saved her. *She* told me that. And you saved me, too... *lots* of ways. But once you save someone, you have to let them go."

"Then go," he said dully.

Justine bit her lip. "Wendell—"

"Go now."

As she was walking away, he pulled the van up and held out her purse. She immediately felt the weight of it and saw a pistol inside. It wasn't until later that she found the \$500 he'd also put in there.

† † †

Comforter, where, where is your comforter?

The little woman didn't stand out. She wasn't a local, but lots of strangers passed through Pollock on the way to the national park. She had on good hiking boots and a nice backpack, but they weren't glossy and new. An experienced eye — like Neal Broderburg's — would judge her as someone who could spend a week in the woods without an RV and call it fun. She looked okay.

Nothing was going on, so Neal decided to get closer.

Though he'd never told anyone, Neal liked the way women's feet looked in tight little hiking boots. It wasn't a fetish or anything. He just liked it. This woman's feet looked particularly good to him and he wondered how long she was going to be in town. He casually took a few steps forward, trying to get near enough to look for a wedding band.

There was something on the back of her backpack like a flag — two circles and an arrow. When he was a yard away, he tipped his hat. "Mornin'," he said.

"B... good day, officer," she replied.

Neal smiled. An accent. Every American man was a sucker for an accent, right? Sounded French maybe, or Italian or something. The park got a few guests from Europe, though they were usually Germans.

She had a wide, open smile and no ring. But there was something about her eyes. Something two degrees from normal. Something that made him think less like a consenting adult who looked good in a uniform and more like a man sworn to serve and protect.

"Doin' a little camping?"

"Yes. I am waiting for some friends. We are going up the Snake River." She said 'yes' and 'waiting' and 'river' with that odd accent... like there was a silent 'u' in front of them.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long."

She shrugged.

"What do they look like? Maybe I've seen them."

"Oh, I do not need your help, thank you." Then she cocked her head, like she was listening. "I... appreciate your offer, though. You are too kind. Perhaps when I have returned from my trip, we may meet again?"

She was pretty enough. High cheekbones, long hair, cute accent, the boots.... But something in her tone made Neal more nervous than aroused. Her eyes were just a little... vacant.

"That would be great, great," he said. Then he looked at his watch. "Whoa! I have a patrol to start. When are you going to be back?"

"Eh, I do not know, so sorry. I shall look for you when I return?"

"Sure." He touched his hat brim again. "I'm Neal Broderburg."

She smiled. He waited.

"And you are...?" he finally prompted.

"Oh, so silly! I am Beatrice. Er, Beatrice Duchamps."

"Nice to meet you." Neal turned — not too fast — and went back to his squad car. Then he drove away — not too fast — parked around a corner, went into a supermarket and discreetly watched her through the front window.

A pickup arrived eventually. It had a cardboard sign in the back window with four linked rings. Beatrice smiled that big smile to the people inside and got in.

Neal almost wrote it off. But instead, he called a buddy in the park service and asked him to keep an eye out for the truck, to find out where they were going.

"You think they're suspicious?" his friend asked.

"N... naaah. The one chick was kind of flirting. Wanna make sure she ain't being passed around like a doobie. You know."

His pal laughed. "Oh, I'll make sure to get an eyeful if it's that kinda party."

† † †
*Our evening is over us; our night
whelms, whelms, and will end us.*

"You're certain this server is secure?" Wendell asked.

"Good to see you again, too," the man standing with a cane said. His name was Lou. "Yeah, it's secure."

Wendell logged in.

"So, long time no see." Wendell responded with a grunt. "What happened to the two teenage ladies with you last time?"

"One died." Wendell didn't even look up from the screen. Lou gulped. "Last I heard, the other was going to rendezvous with Henry Eames."

"Ah, Driver. Poor bastard."

"At least his daughter is still alive."

"The girl who died... she wasn't...?"

"No. Just someone I saved." Wendell sighed. "Where is everyone?"

"Who you looking for?"

"Solomon."

"Quit the list, remember?"

"I remember Rigger getting ejected. What about Ripsaw?"

"Oh man," Lou said. "He hasn't been posting, but I got some news about him from Europe. Went after some big fang with a bunch of other guys. Big guns, explosions, all kinds of crazy police shi... er, stuff."

"Typical Ripsaw. Fifty-percent fatalities?"

"You mean on his side? Yeah. One-hundred percent on the other side from what I hear, though."

"And he survived."

"Uh huh."

"Truly, the Lord looks out for fools."

"Yeah, well, after 9/11, Ripsaw really lost it. Said he was going to Iraq."

"The Lord looks out for madmen, too. Is anyone worthwhile still on the list?"

"Memphis, but I know you two don't get along. Soldier's on once in a while."

"He's a fool, too," Wendell said dismissively. "What about Traveler?"

"No word for months."

"And he's our link to Pedro."

"You know, there's me," Lou said. "I mean, I can't get around so good anymore, but I'm not useless."

"I was hoping to at least get a trio, but it may just be the two of us. I don't like it, but perhaps we can pick up a third while we track our target."

"One target? Sounds big league. Some kind of shifter? Real old fang?"

Wendell shook his head. "Beatrice Tremblay."

Lou paled. "You mean... Oracle?"

"I should have done it long ago."

"But she's one of us!"

"Not anymore. The last time I saw her, I hesitated... but I sensed something foul. I was weak. I followed human feelings instead of divine will." As he spoke, Wendell's voice became colder. "I won't make that mistake again."

"Sorry, man. Count me out."

Wendell turned a calm and contemptuous eye on Lou. "I'm not surprised. Just don't get in my way."

"What?"

"Lou, you know better."

The other man hung his head and fiddled with his cane.

"She ain't on the list anymore," Lou muttered.

"Any idea how to find her?"

Lou shook his head. Wendell nodded and stood to go. At the door, he turned.

"These are hellish choices, Lou. Don't feel bad about your weakness. There is still plenty of good you can do... plenty of *obvious* good."

† † †
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.

"There's something here," the pudgy man said in a hollow voice. "Can you feel it?"

"There is a presence with us always, *mon ami*," Beatrice replied.

The pudgy man wouldn't have passed Neal's inspection. His camping gear was all the same, all brand-new and cheap. He'd huffed and puffed, hauling it into the woods. His name was Rick and he was a laid-off electrical engineer. He'd once persuaded a ghost to give up on revenge and reconcile itself to the afterlife.

The other two people from the truck were Nancy, who did inventory for a baking-supply company, and Patrick, a CPA. Patrick's wife had come back from the grave and he and Nancy had dealt with her together.

"This is something... something bad," Rick said.

"Maybe just something we don't understand," Patrick said, but he didn't seem very sure.

Night had fallen and they had set up camp on the Idaho side of the Snake River. Their fire was terribly small, but to the eyes watching from the woods, it was clearly visible.

The unseen watcher was Neal's forest-ranger friend, Scott. A happily married man, he didn't think much of either woman. Privately, he thought Neal was getting a little hard-up.

Scott went back to his truck and called Neal on the radio.

"So far the only suspicious thing about your campers is that they haven't made smores. They're at site 17, the one by the bend in the river."

"Seventeen? That's where those two girls...."

"Yeah. But you don't think there's anything...?"

"Nah. No connection, I'm sure. If they aren't, you know, *doing* anything."

"Looks like they're going to take canoes out in the morning." Scott was outside the pickup, leaning against its side with the microphone cord stretched through the open window. "I'd say everything's fine."

"Great. Over and out," Neal replied.

Scott shuddered unaccountably, as if the conversation had bothered him somehow. The ranger glanced up at the sky, trying to judge tomorrow's weather. Probably crystal clear. He glanced reflexively to the left and flinched at something that seemed inches from his face. Then he realized it was a bat, not close at all but yards away, which would mean its wingspan was—

He didn't even have time to scream.

† † †
*Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling
flung me,
foot trod | Me?*

Back at his office, Neal felt unsettled somehow. But there was nothing to be disturbed about, he convinced himself, and started home for the evening. His car was parked near Woodsmoke Outfitters, and as he walked up, he saw a man inside the store.

Neal almost went right by, but there was something about the man that made the officer pause. There was something about his posture, his gestures, that attracted Neal's attention. The man was speaking to Norris, the owner, and was trouble. Neal had been a cop for a while. He instinctively ran through a list of likely possibilities: wife-beater, angry drunk, armed robber, pissed-off driver.

Neal couldn't have said exactly what, but he was willing to bet money that under the right circumstances, this guy would be violent.

He went in and heard, "Look, I *know* you saw her. Your eyes tell me you're lying. Lying is a sin. You should stop it right now."

"Evenin'," Neal said pleasantly.

The man turned, straightened slowly and dropped his shoulders. He was visibly trying to appear to be relaxed.

"Officer," he said.

As Neal got closer, he thought he saw the man's eyes flick down to his shirtfront, then back to his face. Neal glanced down himself, wondering why the man had

looked at his Knights of Columbus tiepin, then asked, "Is there some kind of problem?"

"No problem," the man replied.

"He's looking for someone," Norris said.

"Maybe I can help."

Before the stranger could stop him, the clerk gave Neal a piece of paper.

It was from a color printer and it had a picture of Beatrice Duchamps on it. Only, it said her name was Beatrice Tremblay and that she was a dangerous criminal wanted in Canada.

"You know this woman?" Neal asked.

"The question is, do you?"

"Why don't you come with me? We can both get some answers."

The man hesitated. He looked at Norris, then at Neal. Suddenly the room filled with thick black smoke.

"What the...?" Neal reached for his pistol and was startled to find a hand already there. He put both hands on his holster, only to feel another gun barrel pressed against his temple.

"I'm loath to kill an officer of the law, but I will if you don't tell me where she is."

"I... I can't...."

"Campsite 17!" For a moment, Neal didn't recognize Norris' voice. It was so squeaky and scared. "Her and her friends bought a map. Asked for directions!"

"I would like to purchase the same map, with the same directions."

"Norris, don't!"

"Officer, please lie down on the floor." The request was punctuated by the hard click of a hammer being drawn back on a revolver.

† † †
*That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

Wendell truly felt bad about having to handcuff the sheriff and the store clerk. He didn't think it would take them more than 10 minutes to be freed. Then the cop would head for campsite 17. With some luck, he'd find only the traitor's body. But if not, he'd find the horrors of Hell.

As he parked near the campsite, Wendell heard a scream. The cop would not be lucky.

"At least he's a Christian," Wendell muttered as he adjusted his night-vision goggles and checked the silencer on his sniper rifle.

He muttered a quick Act of Contrition and was sickened but not surprised to see evil upon the land. It was dormant for the moment, but clouding the air like smoke, laced through every tree like sap, beating in the blood of every animal watching through the undergrowth.

Wendell set out through the woods at a fast pace, trying to find the riverbank. Perhaps he could flank the

group, take them by surprise. He stumbled a couple times. Perhaps the land was awakening to his presence, trying to seize him. He didn't fall, though, and he finally broke through the bushes to the rocky shore.

He saw movement and glanced up in time to see the soaring shapes of enormous bats as one peeled off and another swooped down at him.

The rifle he carried was big, powerful and awkward. In addition, tonight it was equipped with a starlight scope, which he couldn't use without taking off his night-vision goggles. Wendell raised the gun and fired by dead reckoning. The monstrous animal fell into the water in two pieces, but three of its fellows swooped down on the attack.

Wendell dropped his rifle as he leapt back into the undergrowth, pulling a pistol from his shoulder holster. He lay down on his back, trying to present an oblique target as he took one shot, then two. Each bat fell, one dead, the other crippled. He ignored the wounded creature's splashing as the third fastened itself to his chest, chewing through his mesh vest. Snarling, Wendell seized the thrashing thing with his left hand, jammed the gun into its furry body with his other, and pulled the trigger.

The creature's blood splashed on him. The close muzzle flash ignited his clothes briefly, but he was left unharmed.

Before Wendell could catch his breath, he heard a distant gunshot and screams. Some part of his mind registered that the dead bat shrank to a normal size. But he had already lurched to his feet, seized his rifle and started running down the beach.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," he whispered, renewing the holy sight as he rounded a bend. He spied the glare of the fire through his night-vision goggles. Diving onto his stomach, he crawled toward the foot of a tree.

With part of his attention, he flipped down the rifle's bipod, tore off his goggles, and made the best of the tree's cover. With another part, he gazed at the evil before him. A woman was already dead, face down in the sand. Two others held flaming branches. They screamed as they swung upward at swooping bats, and struck downward at clutching roots and huge, skittering insects. Wendell saw the sheriff—who must have known a faster route—standing at the edge of a path, face twisted in disbelief, firing a shotgun. But most of Wendell's attention focused on two remaining figures.

One was Beatrice Tremblay. She stood with her back to him, a flashlight in each hand, turned off and pointing down at the ground.

The other was a bear, but not really a bear. Looking with the angel's sight, Wendell could see that the evil all around the place was focused within the beast. It was something deep and foul and older than the stars. It was hate without limit and force without form, flowing through and around the creature in the way a plague-bearing wind might flow over a windowsill.

The same vileness moved through Tremblay.



"Your choice is clear!" Beatrice shouted. "Come to the light or be burned and destroyed!"

The bear's reply was hideous.

"I BEND KNEE TO NO MAN, NO GOD — AND NO DEMON!"

Beatrice raised and beamed both flashlights at its chest, but the abomination belched forth a cloud of blood and darkness, blocking and absorbing the light.

The sheriff screamed as a huge spider bit clean through his boot.

"Thy will be done..." Wendell whispered as he squeezed the trigger, pumping round after round at the bats and beasts. Some hit. Some missed. But inside, he knew it was hopeless. They kept coming: Swirling from the dark above and scuttling through the undergrowth. Even as he prayed, he felt the rage rise within him. And even as he prayed, he counted bullets.

What could he do? Keep shooting until his ammunition was gone? That would be pointless, and would just delay the inevitable. Target the bear? Even if a bullet could kill it, he would lose his chance to kill Tremblay, the Judas, the betrayer. Or he could shoot her, taking the beast out of check and letting it ravage the others.

With one shot left, the rage was overwhelming. He couldn't save them. He couldn't save anyone. He was useless and weak. He was pointless and miserable and small and there was nothing left but the taste of spite.

"As we forgive those who trespass against us..." he whispered as he centered the crosshairs on Beatrice Tremblay's back. She hadn't moved. Whatever unholy force she carried like a sickness, it was locked in stalemate with the other. Matched in power and wickedness, neither could overcome.

And then he felt *the presence*.

He had read that some of the Chosen heard from the angels again, after their initial blessing. He had long envied that contact, but now that they spoke to him again, he remembered the raw terror that they brought.

"ONLY YOU CAN SAVE THEM," he heard.

"How?" he whispered. "Please. Please tell me how."

Already the presence within him seemed so powerful, so vast, that he felt as if his skin was going to split. Then it increased even more, bringing with it a flood of images. He intuitively understood that words were not their way, that their true language was reality itself.

He saw an altar. A fire. He saw the Eucharist raised on high. A great crucifix. A goat with its horns caught in a bush.

"A sacrifice," he whispered. "I give it. Anything at all."

More images. He couldn't look away, because they were not only in his mind, they *were* his mind. They were his memories and he was reliving them.

The horrified look of the playground lady. "What did you do to him Wendell? What did you do?"

The burning shame as the judge said, "You seem like an upright young man, but you must control your temper!"

The fear in his sergeant's eyes as Wendell knelt on the man's chest, raining blows onto his face.

The icy calm as Wendell made tiny adjustments to his aim while his target walked across the parking lot, eating a donut, ready for a day's murders.

The joy in his heart as he fired bullet after bullet into a vampire's back as it crawled away, leaking its stolen blood, mewling and begging.

The way Karla's pimp trembled as the man peered unseeing into the angel fog, unaware as Wendell pointed a gun at his face.

The blood slave, crying as Wendell swung the baseball bat against the man's outstretched arms.

The vindication he knew when he slapped Karla and screamed, "Whore! Harlot! Temptress!"

And Justine in the front seat, eyes bright with fear as he lunged at her.

Wendell's eyes were wet with tears as he said, "Yes. Take it. Take it all."

† † †

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee
— Gerard Manley Hopkins

Neal's first wild shot had been fired in panic, but the second hit and that steadied him. Time seemed to slow down as the sheer horror of what he witnessed seemed to overload his capacity for fear. His third and fourth shots were made in a sort of fugue state, unthinking, unfeeling, just acting. But he knew his gun held only five shots and after that, he was going to die.

As he ejected the spent cartridge of his fourth round, Neal saw someone stand up near the riverbank and stride resolutely forward. He had a moment to think, "It's the guy from the store. He's going to die, too," before the bats converged.

The man had a pistol in his hand, and when he fired it at a bat, there was a blinding glare — like a brief slice of daylight spliced into the night. The two men by the fire were so tired and harried that they knelt on the ground, waving their torches feebly while the circling shadows closed for the kill. But as the newcomer came within the radius of their firelight, he screamed "Away!" and the monsters fled.

A small, strange hope entered Neal's heart and he began to run, stumbling toward this mystery, this savior.

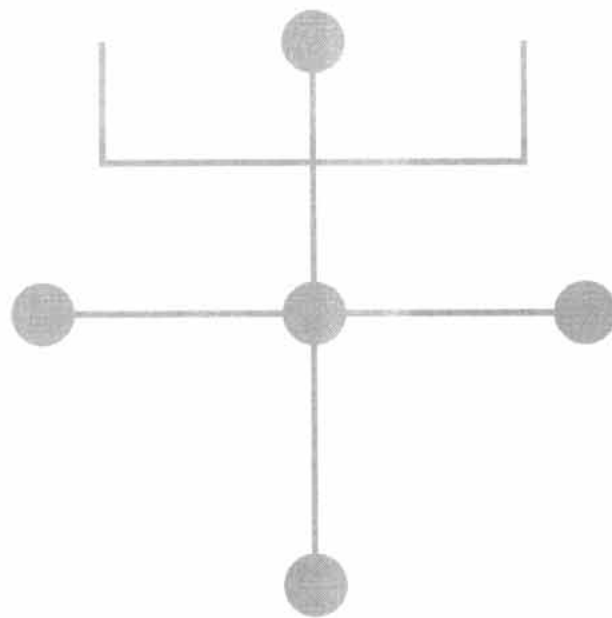
The man continued to fire into the air, long past when his revolver should have been empty. He pointed the pistol at the strange, monstrous, hellish being — and suddenly it was simply a brown bear again. It shied away from the fire and made off into the darkness.

The woman, Beatrice Duchamps, Beatrice Tremblay, turned to face the stranger. The beams of her lights seemed dim now, weak electric flickers that played upon the man's face.

"Return," he told her. His face was a clean mask of seraphic tranquillity.

Wordlessly, she fled into the night.

Fall From Grace



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WHITE WOLF HOCKEY SPECIAL THANKS

Chad "Sideways Goalie" **Brown** (#14, Wing), for toughing it out with busted players in dome hockey.

Brian "Hockey?" **Glass** (#84, Goal). Oh, Brian.

Matt "Most Offensive Church Mouse" **Milberger** (#7, Wing), for being able to crash the net but not raise his voice above a peep.

Mike "Posthumous" **Tinney** (#11, Goal), for entering the Hall of Fame.

Fred "Wheels" **Yelk** (#56, Defense), for playing roller hockey on three points: two skates and an ass.



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Fall From Grace

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INTRODUCTION

*Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight,
show me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace
in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people.*

— Exodus 33:13

THE PRICE OF POWER

When a person is imbued, she's thrown headlong into a nightmare world that she never knew existed. She's awoken to a horrific reality in which monsters, things out of children's fantasies, are proven to exist. Not only are the creatures of the night real, they lurk in the shadows, manipulate the unsuspecting and prey upon the helpless. A newly chosen hunter might be able to turn her back on the things for a while, but probably not for long as she recognizes them at work or everywhere and eventually realizes that the people, places and things she cares for are in jeopardy. She has to do *something*.

A hunter's first days, nights, weeks and even months are spent in torment. She dares to contend with the supernatural at risk to life, limb, mind and soul. She might seek to destroy every being she comes across, to make the things see the error of their ways and exist in harmony with society, or she might try to learn the very secrets behind monsters. No matter what approach she takes or what calling she answers, every lesson she learns and every victory she wins comes by hard knocks. The kind that raise bruises, break bones, drain spirits, distance friends, end careers and kill family. Seeing the real world and knowing a glimmer of the truth can seem like a precious gift — the hunter is allowed to wake from the

dream that clouded her mind before — but she's virtually alone in her awareness and forced to come to grips with a miserable new life.

Subjected to these pressures, many hunters don't make it. They fall under the teeth and claws of beasts, become the playthings of puppet masters or take their own lives when they can't bear the suffering any longer. Others, however, manage to endure. They might bear an intense grudge or impose a self-imposed mission against the supernatural and just can't let go or won't be defeated. They might feel such immense sorrow or have such bountiful forgiveness for monsters that they refuse to stop reconciling creatures. Or they might have such blinding insight into or lofty aspirations for the world that they endure all suffering to fulfill a greater good.

These hunters who survive delve further and further into the hunt. Their lives before can become little more than memories as they strive to deal with more monsters or salvage any fragments of hope. As these tenacious few achieve successes and find more scraps of the truth, they gain increasing power. They manifest new and strange edges that allow them to continue the mission. Whether these capabilities are acquired as a reward for their victories or as tools with which to score victories is unknown. The Messengers — or whomever or whatever awakens the chosen — offer no answers. But with increasing

power, surviving hunters can accomplish greater feats, face increasingly potent beings and solve ever more perplexing mysteries about the supernatural.

These edges, advantages and insights come at a price, though. Immersion in the hunt distances the chosen from whoever they used to be, so much so that they can lose touch with themselves and their sanity. Perhaps it's the burden of knowing horrible truths, of witnessing horrific spectacles or of being mere humans bestowed inhuman power. The reason doesn't matter. The fact is, hunters who persevere ironically go mad. It seems woefully unfair that the reward for fulfilling some mandated mission is insanity, but there's no telling what the so-called "Heralds" have in mind, or what they expect of their chosen. All that does seem clear is that remaining steadfast against the corruption and gaining ever more diverse and amazing capabilities erodes a hunter's mind and identity even as he's empowered.

Imbued who attain this stunning extremity demonstrate the price they pay for it. They seem erratic, motivated by compulsions and goals that are incomprehensible to "lesser" hunters. These extremists can even prove to be opponents for fellow imbued when intentions and goals clash. A group of hunters might plan to show a vampire how it can abstain from preying upon people to survive, while a "wacko" hunter targets the creature, the hunters and anyone affiliated with them for destruction, because they're all "clearly" contributors to whatever fuels the unknown.

How long an extremist hunter can carry on, wielding frightening power, yet struggling with crippling derangement, is uncertain. She might finally go too far and lose herself to her dementia. She might make seemingly absurd decisions about the "enemy" that force other imbued or mortal authorities to take her out. Or she might bring everything she has to bear against monsters and learn too late that it's too little. At this point, the hunter has had a long "career" as the chosen go, but it doesn't usually end well for her or anyone around her.

What if it didn't have to end that way, though? What if there were even greater heights to which an extremist could rise in the pursuit of her cause? What if there was even greater power available to her, if only she could suffer, strain, prevail or compromise herself enough to attain it? What could she accomplish then? What miraculous feats could she perform? And, as with all things associated with the hunt, what price must be paid for even these accomplishments?

Or perhaps more frightening still, what forces, beings or entities could offer such rewards and raise some imbued beyond the limits to which the rest are confined? Do these exceedingly rare chosen simply have it within themselves to rise above other imbued and extremists? Or are other "parties" at work, dabbling in what hunters are meant to be or can become?

There's only one way to find out — as long as striking a deal doesn't lead to a fall from grace.

RISE AND FALL

Fall from Grace is a landmark book for **Hunter: The Reckoning**. It's dedicated to playing and storytelling the most obsessed, driven, potent and insane of the imbued: extremists. These are characters who've seen and done brave, dangerous, terrifying and tragic things in the name of the hunt. They started as all the chosen do at the imbuing, but have managed to survive and struggle long enough that they have become experienced, perhaps even seasoned in carrying out the mission. With that status, however, come mental and emotional stresses and eventually full-blown insanity.

In rules terms, "extremists" are those characters who rise to a rating of 7 or higher in a primary Virtue, or in more than one Virtue — Mercy, Vision or Zeal. It's at 7 Virtue that derangements develop for these determined champions, and it's also at such seeming heights of power that their lives and identities truly begin to collapse.

Previous **Hunter** books have discussed extremists, who they are and how other imbued tend to understand and deal with them. It's not until those book that these "wackos," "psychos" and "saints" are addressed with their own concepts, guidelines and rules, for use by players and Storytellers. You get ideas for how to portray and handle these characters in your game, whether they have a 7 Virtue or 10, whether they have various low-level edges or a level-four power. You also get tips on how to decide on goals for such driven imbued, and help on acting out their crushing ailments.

Fall from Grace doesn't stop there, though. This book is **Hunter's** contribution to the Year of the Damned. It asks the dangerous question of how far the imbued are willing to go to complete their quests against monsters. What they're willing to pay for the power to make their twisted dreams a reality. In asking these questions, this book breaks bounds that were established before. The ways and means to attaining level-five edges are explored. Finally, hunters can exceed the limitations imposed upon them since the first person was chosen. The doors to almighty power are opened.

But is access to such might a good thing, especially when dealing with "maniacs," "lunatics" and "burn-outs"? Can extremists cope with the pressures and demands of wielding power that humanity was never meant to have? How long can these hunters' frail bodies and minds hold together? What happens when they fail, and who might be taken with them? They say a dying star burns brightest at the end...

Perhaps the most burning question raised by this book is, *Where do these powers come from?* Far be it for a game supplement to dictate the terms, vision or direction of your game. **Fall from Grace** offers three possible

origins for extremists' epic power, general ideas and terms that hopefully lend themselves to and support your chronicle rather than subvert or rewrite it. You as a player or you as a Storyteller get to decide what's possible for the ultimate extremists in your game, and you get to decide how their epic stories unfold in your interpretation of the World of Darkness.

This book tells three stories about extremists who rise to the pinnacle of imbued power, and demonstrates how similar fates can be met in your game.

Chapter 1: The Solitary Road shows one route to the amazing strength you know best, as attained through the creeds and the "standard" **Hunter** systems. There's nothing "standard" about the imbued who go this *independent* route, though.

Chapter 2: Cracked as the Desert Ground illustrates what can happen when the imbued strive for their goals so fervently that they forego everything else, even themselves. Such efforts are so impressive that they draw the attention of forces that might only be defined as *divine*.

Chapter 3: The Devil You Know plumbs the depths to which some disturbed, fanatical chosen are willing to go to meet their perverse or deranged ends. This *corrupt* path might promise immense strength, but it's a deal with the devil.

Chapter 4: Rules and Storytelling investigates ideas, possibilities and systems for playing and running extremists, and for those heroic or tragic figures who seize level-five edges.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Stories about people who give everything and go too far in pursuing their goals are hardly new. They've been told for ages and you can find inspiration for an extremist hunter almost anywhere. Here are a few examples.

Moby Dick, by Herman Melville — The classic. A sea captain out for revenge against the creature that maimed him years before. An ideal metaphor for a hunter who stalks the monster that he first encountered at his imbuing — and who goes insane in the process. That, and Ahab isn't afraid to take his enemy and any of his allies down with him.

Heart of Darkness — Either the book by Conrad or the Coppola interpretation *Apocalypse Now*. Kurtz is definitely a man too dangerous to be near, a lunatic with a moral mission who's gone way, way too far.

Mystery Walk, by Robert McCammon — A book about two kids, Billy Creekmore and Wayne Falconer, who grow up under different religions (Choctaw and Evangelical Christianity). The kids hate each other and essentially want each other dead. But then they encounter a "Shape Changer" and lose their minds and gain powers in the process of fighting it. Each character

exemplifies a person-with-unexpected-powers who sacrifices left and right in battle with supernatural evil.

You Come When I Call You, by Douglas Clegg — A horror novel with a great **Hunter**-esque mood. Basic, blue-collar kids have grown up and gone mad in dealing with a thing called the "Desolation Angel." Some see visions, some dream of demons, and others simply get pushed too far.

Falling Down — This movie has been discussed in previous **Hunter** books, but it stands as an insightful reference in this one, too. An ordinary guy becomes obsessed with seeing his estranged wife and child, and loses all sense of right or wrong. His words at the end could be uttered in disbelief by any hunter, especially an extremist — "I'm the bad guy?"

Memento — A film about a man who loses the ability to make new memories. He's obsessed with finding his wife's killer; her death is the last memory he has. He tattoos the clues of her passing on his body and is focused solely on revenge, not knowing how long he's been at this. The story is told in a reverse but seamless narrative, from end to beginning.

Frailty — While not perfect as a **Fall From Grace** primer, it's an ideal **Hunter** movie all around. The main character (played by Bill Paxton) takes to his mission of "murdering demons who look like people" with a simple single-mindedness, and without question. Plus, he's damn near impossible to catch. He even brings his children into it. A very disturbing story of what could be a hunter gone horribly awry. (Or has he?)

Sexy Beast — A movie about an ex-con trying to retire and live a peaceful life with his wife in Spain. Ben Kingsley plays a London fixer who's putting a team together for a heist, and he goes to Spain to recruit the retired con. Kingsley won't take no for an answer, and harasses the ex-con into joining the team. Kingsley is single-minded and frightening in his insistence.

V For Vendetta, by Alan Moore and David Lloyd — A masked anarchist/terrorist/messiah fights a fascist English government. "V" acts according to his own agenda, and his methods are dangerous and inexplicable; he puts his protégé through months of psychological torture to break her spirit and re-create her in his own image. It's easy to use V's actions and style as a template for those of a violent extremist.

Swamp Thing, by DC Comics and Brian K. Vaughn — Not the old one, but the new one with a female protagonist. A great comic about a girl who was once seemingly human, but who begins to realize her cruel floral destiny. She has many choices to make along the way as she grows increasingly cold, and begins taking extreme steps to show humans the ecological error of their ways. Her progression is very natural from a high-school girl to a half-plant/half-girl, who also happens to consider murder on behalf of "The Green."



CHAPTER 1: THE SOLITARY ROAD

And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.

— Isaiah 59:14

10-1

They want me to keep a diary. A journal. Some kind of dumb-ass time-management technique that's supposed to help me "organize my thoughts" and "track my progress." I thought it was a stupid idea at first, but I didn't say that of course. Now I'm almost addicted to it. I write every day. So here I am, starting yet another notebook.

I realized today that I've been spying on Mary Ellen for over a year now. I never expected to be watching her for this long. I call it "keeping tabs on her." I was sure I'd lose interest after a few weeks. I don't feel like I'm obsessed. But I can't stop, so maybe I am. I've got three drawers full of notebooks like this, but I can't even bring myself to read them. It's as if keeping these records is less important than making them. Maybe watching Mary Ellen is healthy in a weird way. Maybe it helps me cope.

It's a few hours later now. I can't sleep. I've been thinking about what I wrote earlier. The truth is, I know damn well what I'm doing isn't healthy. I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm just lonely. I don't have any right to talk to Mary Ellen or get mixed up in her life, but keeping track of her somehow makes me feel connected to her. I wish I could approach her. I wish I could offer to help her somehow. She needs help. I know that much. Before the divorce, she was a beautiful, outgoing woman who lived in a \$400,000 house and loved to throw dinner parties. Now she's got a one-room apartment in a seedy part of town, and she scrapes by as a temp. She never sees any of her old friends anymore, and doesn't seem to have made any new ones. She never gets any visitors.

I managed to break into her apartment once. I know it was wrong, but I did it. What I found terrified me. There was no furniture except for an old cot.

Nothing hanging on the walls. No curtains, but the windows were papered over. No books, no magazines, but piles and piles of newspapers. A tiny black-and-white TV and a clock radio. A few plates, a mug, a fork and a spoon. A towel. And not much else. The woman was living like a monk. She got a shitload of money in the divorce. What did she spend it on?

And then there's her appearance. She's lost a good 20 or 30 pounds. Once she was a little bit overweight. Now she's almost a rail. She seems to have gained some muscle, but not in a fit, healthy kind of way like you get at the gym. She looks more like she's been breaking rocks on a chain gang. Or maybe it's her haircut that makes me think of prison. It used to be past her shoulders. Now it's cut so short that she looks like a man. The old Mary Ellen could spend an entire day trying on clothes at Nordstrom's. Now she dresses like a boot camp refugee.

Her face. Well, I've written about that before. I probably will again, but I just can't right now.

STAY UP LATE

They sleep, thinking they're safe. But what they are is soft. Vulnerable. Helpless. Nothing but weak flesh hiding behind a thin shell of walls and doors and simple locks. I invade. I slip through their defenses. Penetrate their boundaries like a virus. Carry my toxin deep into the bodies where it will do the most harm. They sleep, and I sift through the mundane artifacts that are scattered around their home like discarded thoughts. Their careless detritus offends me. A skin magazine sealed in plastic. A

cereal bowl encrusted with stale, dry milk. A green ottoman stained with brown gravy. A jelly glass that smells of bourbon. A moth trapped between two window panes. Why does no one put these things in their proper place? Why am I always the one to make things right?

But this is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful life. I no longer belong in a place like this. I've been exiled from the land of the living room. If I stop to look around, I get dizzy and have to bite my lip to remember where I am. This is somebody else's world. The home of the happily ignorant who don't realize that something dead and once buried might be sniffing their garbage and pressing its nose against their window.

I'm not wearing shoes. I need quiet. I feel the nap of the carpet through my socks, tickling my soles like thousands of tiny fingers. Where are my ballet slippers, the ones I wore when I was eight? I wanted to be a ballerina but my mother said I was fat. But look at me now, stepping so carefully, so precisely, dancing across somebody else's floor. I don't want the house to hear me. It seems like it takes an eternity to cross the room, feeling my way around the cheap furniture, brushing past bookshelves stacked with garish porcelain animals.

In the front hall, the feeble yellow glow of the porch light filters through the curtains. These people. They leave their porch light on all night while their backyard is abandoned to darkness. They have high fences all around to protect their privacy from neighbors who they never talk to or visit. I know. I've been watching. They probably don't even know each other's names. Maybe I should visit the neighbors, too. There's a fire inside me, and as long as it's burning I can stay up all night. Nothing can touch me. I came in through the back door. It had no deadbolt. No alarm. Only a chain-lock that popped out like a toddler's tooth.

The carpet continues up the stairs, and so do I. My favorite song resonates in the back of my mind, "Fa fa fa fa / fa fa fa fa fa..." I'm a nightmare looking for a dream to spoil. I often feel like I'm in a dream, only it's someone else's, not mine. At the top of the stairs, I become a statue. My eyes half closed, I listen, I hear. Faint snuffling sounds — snoring — from the master bedroom. It's hard to be sure over the white noise of the air-conditioner. But that same noise will muffle any sound I might make.

Oh God, the hall. The carpet is almost worn to threads in the middle and is dotted with faded stains. It looks like it belongs in a motel. The walls are paneled and dreadful. I'm nauseous. I don't want to be here. This ugly pre-fab subdivision is not mine. I want so much to be in my own house, but that house is gone, and the people who lived there are gone, including the person who used to think she was me.

Whispers across the lawn. A hand in the dark. The smell of smoke. It takes these images to snap me back to the task at hand.

Mr. F:

Destroy this after you read it, like before.

Where you been? I left this same message at the other two places. As far as I can tell, you and I are the only ones who survived last week. Unless you count L., who I visited in the hospital yesterday. He still isn't speaking clear and the doctor doesn't think he will any time soon.

I wish you guys would let me get involved more. I guess I understand your reasons, but it's hard for me to figure out what happened. Now that some time has gone by, security at the train yard is pretty slow again. I snuck in a few days ago and looked around. I got some images of the fighting. I found a maintenance shed with a broken lock. It was filled with trash, but mixed in with the junk was a strange bunch of newer stuff. Like an alarm clock, a CD player, a man's tie, some knives and spoons, a TV remote. Nothing valuable. They were all cleaner than the garbage, though, and set aside like they'd been used recently. Worse was a pair of child's sneakers, a coloring book (three pages colored) and some stuffed animals. I didn't get any images from them.

I guess it's pretty clear our friend didn't tell us everything. I want to tell you why I was so sure we should work with her. The day before she found us, I saw something. The words to a poem I was reading were suddenly different and said "Outsiders become allies." When M.E. showed up, I thought the words meant her. I still think there's something big going on. I'm just not sure what to do about it.

Whatever that monster you fought was, it looks gone. I think we should feel good about that. Did you see in the paper, the article about the Rooney kid? The cops arrested his uncle. The proof looks pretty thin to me. Did someone frame him? Did the police screw up? I keep thinking about those sneakers. They were blue and red, a little boy's. Maybe I'm imagining something that isn't there. But you guys said I'm good at that, right? M.E. said more kids would disappear if we didn't do something. I keep reminding myself of that.

If you're out there, please write back. You know where I am. We have to figure out what to do next. Let's make a plan.

G.



At last, I reach the child's room. It's at the far end of the hall. I know from watching the house, from peering into the windows with binoculars and sketching likely floor plans on the underside of a pizza box. When I call the map to mind, I can smell cheese.

The door is ajar. I barely need to move it. I glide into the room like a ghost. The little girl is sleeping. Laughing ponies and smiling flowers chase each other across her quilted comforter. Their eternally sunny world rises and falls as she breathes. I step up to the bed, lean in close and can smell toothpaste on her breath. Her cheeks look so round and flush, like persimmons. Her ears are small seashells. I want to stroke her hair, kiss her neck. Mommy's here, Amber. But don't get the wrong idea. I know this isn't Amber. I really do. Toys and stuffed animals are arranged around her bed like a circle of disciples. A doll on the dresser looks at me, its dead eyes shining in the moonlight. My tools are in my backpack, carefully stowed so they stay quiet. I take off the pack and begin my blood-red work.

When it's over, when I've left the house, when I've returned to my hiding place of the moment, I close my eyes and picture the little girl. I wonder what her name is. I wonder who her friends are, what her teachers are like, what cartoons she watches. One thing I don't wonder is if she'll ever understand what

I've done for her. I know she won't. Tomorrow will be a traumatic day. She'll be terrified by the screaming of her parents when they see the red words I've splattered on the walls. She won't understand the implications of the broken lock, or the muddy footprints I left on the back porch. But her parents will get the message. After the police have left, they'll put good, strong locks on their doors. They'll talk about getting an alarm system or a big dog. They'll make a point to talk to their neighbors. The entire community will become cautious. They'll become distrustful of strangers. They'll watch each other's backs. They'll watch their children closely.

And the real thing that's been stalking this neighborhood will decide to leave them alone and go elsewhere.

LITTLE CREATURES

The dream is falling away from me (or I'm falling away from it) like a stone dropped into a river. There's a human child in my doorway, a scrawny, dark-haired runt with thick glasses and a dirty face. He looks kind of like Harry Potter, if Harry Potter spent his days playing in junkyards and mud piles. For a second, I wonder if he's imaginary, if both of my shaky legs are standing in reality. My stomach gnaws at me and my throat is as dry as an empty well. I give the ugly pre-teen my best angry

glare. He rolls up one of his sleeves to show one of the signs drawn on his arm. He smiles a crooked smile, not knowing that something has laid eggs inside me.

"No," I answer him, "My name's not Mary Ellen. And I'm not interested." I start to push the door closed.

"Wait," he says. "I've been looking for you all over! I gotta talk to you!" He sticks his foot in front of the door. Four days of not eating has left me too weak to force him back.

"Get out," I snarl. "You've got the wrong person." Who sent him? Anger makes my fists clench like the coils of a boa constrictor.

"No, I don't, ma'am," he says. "I know who you are. I've seen you before. You haven't see me, but you've heard of me. I'm C."

† † †

The nearest place to eat is one of those fried chicken restaurants. A smiling chicken on the door doesn't seem to realize he's on the menu. Seen that look before. The child not only insists on eating everything with his hands, but he also manages to smear greasy chicken fat all over his mouth. I make him wipe his face and eat with a knife and fork before I'll talk to him. He looks like he's been wearing the same T-shirt for a month. It's covered in food stains and nearly worn through at the shoulders. His posture is terrible.

"Start by telling me how you found me," I say, because I can't stand watching him chew with his mouth open anymore. My words seem to circle my head like flies. The vision at the motel has left me. I can't remember it anymore, but I'm still light-headed.

"Oh, I just kinda figured it out. Thought about it and stuff. Guess I got a little lucky. After the fight at the train yard in Quincy, I posted some messages on hunter-net—"

"On what?"

"Hunter-net? On the Internet? Don't you use it?"

"I hate computers," I tell him. "Don't eat while you're talking." I have nothing to say, but I maintain the conversation. This isn't like me.

"Anyways," he puts down a chicken leg, "I got this email from this, like, guy I know? He said he and some other guys met up with you and planned something. So I went to his place and hung out for awhile. You were already gone. But then I got a message and—"

"A message from who?"

"From the... you know... the Messengers." His voice drops a bit. "I get them every few weeks."

Messengers. Heralds. I've heard other hunters use these terms. They're loaded words based on unwise assumptions. I call them the voices, whatever they are, because all I really know for certain is that they speak to me. I think.

"I was reading my poetry book," C says. "*Contemporary American Poets*. That's where they always talk to me. You like poetry?"

"Only the Talking Heads. *Ce que j'ai fait, ce soir la. Ce qu'elle a dit, ce soir la.*" He stares at me. "Finish your story," I tell him.

"So anyway, this e.e. cummings poem I'm looking at, all of a sudden the words rearrange and it spells 'HOUSE OF THE SLEEPING MOON.' Cool, huh? So I kinda thought about that for a day or so, and then I remembered that there was this motel or something called the Sleepy Moon on Highway 13. When I was nine my uncle took me there to the Rocks and Minerals show. I bought a fossilized fish from the Devonian period. That's when fish first evolved jaws. Did you know there are only two species of jawless fish still around today? The hagfish and.... So, I sneaked around the hotel and, you know, found your room."

He sucks on his straw until all the soda is drained from his cup, and he keeps sucking to make an annoying slurping noise. "How are you getting to all these places? You're too young to drive."

"Oh, I get my Uncle Pete to drive me." He leans forward and whispers, "He's kinda dumb. I can pretty much get him to do anything I want."

Now that I've eaten, I feel my strength returning. I feel the fire burning behind my ribs. My muscles are warm and I feel a need to act, to do things, to be away from here. I need to separate myself from this dirty child with his atrocious table manners and his hundreds of questions. I need to get to some town called Trinity. That's what the dead voice said.

Something is different since my vision in the motel. Somewhere inside me, eggs are hatching and their occupants are slithering out. Tiny monsters in my veins. I should just leave this kid here, but I can't. He's cleverly stranded himself with me and I'll have to take him home. I can't abandon him here. I want to, but I can't. Too many children never come home.

"I've been thinking a lot about the fight in Quincy," he says. "Except for you, only one other person got out. This guy Mr. F., he—"

"Once you hear the voices, your days are numbered. You need to understand that." If he expects me to take responsibility for the deaths of his buddies — Kyle and the rest of them — he's going to be disappointed.

"It was my fault," he says. "You see, I'm — I was — sort of the leader of the group. I convinced them to go along with you. Now I realize it was a mistake. I did it because of a message I got. It told me to help you. But I've been thinking about it and now I realize that the message was for me — personally. I'm supposed to help you. That's why I came looking for you. To help."

I can only stare at the boy, feeling hot forces slither under my skin, wondering how long I can keep them under control. For a fraction of a second, I imagine myself and this boy as a pair of ants on a driveway,

C

I've been away, very far away, but I'll tell you about that another time. I hope you get this message. Please get in touch with me right away. I did some checking. That woman in Quincy is bad news. She's not in her right mind. I've spoken with some others who've worked with her. They all say she's dangerous. If she turns up again, don't approach her. I mean that, C. Don't let your curiosity get the better of you. You're a smart guy, so you know to listen to me, right? Contact me and I'll decide what needs to be done. You just stay away from her.

F

obsessing over a breadcrumb while a Ford Explorer pulls out of the garage and rolls toward us.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

I'm somewhere else now, crouched on the ground. Hands pressed to the chest of a dying man. It's Michael. I'm wet. It's raining. He was tainted. One of them. He's been shot. Doesn't matter. Blood warm beneath my hands. Washing away in the rain. Press on the wound. Is the bullet inside him? He's coughing. Can't stop the bleeding. Doesn't matter. Doesn't bother me. Should it?

"Look at me," says the one who shot him. He has his pistol aimed at me. There's camouflage makeup on his face. Do I know him? "I watched you talking to that puppet," he says. "You weren't nearly so talkative to me or the others back in Quincy. Remember?"

Then I place him. One of C's group. 'F.' The survivor. "You've changed your face," I tell him.

"I don't want to kill you if I don't have to, Mary Ellen."

"That's not my name anymore," I tell him. "Shoot if you want. I don't care."

He ignores me. He talks like a high-school teacher who's caught a kid smoking. He's been thinking about this lecture for a long time, I'll bet. "I've spoken with a lot of people since that night," he says. "To other hunters who've been hurt, thanks to you."

Michael has stopped breathing. I take my hand from his wound. It sighs like a lover. I move slowly. Shift my weight. Prepare to spring. I tilt my head so the rain doesn't fall in my eyes.

He's nervous. His hands are shaking. He's afraid of me. "We're in a war, you know?" he says. He chews at his lower lip. "That's not just a figure of speech. We're in a war. Maybe it's our last chance. I think you've forgotten which side you're on."

"I don't want—" I begin to say, but then the world changes. Light, heat or energy gushes out of me. My eyes. My mouth. My pores. I'm warm. My fatigue is gone. I stand. Strange syllables echo in my ears: "NABA IA VEDDUN MONEM ESSET UMMUM." No bullet will

touch me now. I can reach him in the blink of an eye if I want to. Snatch his weapon.

But then the light turns off and leaves me empty.

"Oh, oh God" he stutters, swaying but still pointing his gun at me. "Did you hear it? Was that *them*?" I don't know what he's talking about. "I guess you're that far gone," he says. "They don't speak to you anymore. But I heard it." He stands a little straighter.

"It said, 'THIS GIFT WILL BE YOURS WHEN YOU EARN IT.' You understand what that means? The angels. They haven't abandoned you."

The angels? The Messengers. The Heralds. The voices. I have a headache. My heart is beating like a trapped bird. For a fraction of a second, it all makes sense. I struggle to hold onto a truth that's been whispered to me. I know. I know at last who my real enemies are. Children in jeopardy. Husband complicit. No one can be trusted. Monsters everywhere. But who's behind the monsters? Who knows all about them? Who revealed them to me?

When I was Mary Ellen, who let me watch as my children were taken, but didn't grant me the power to save them?

"The Messengers," I say. Breathe. Stay controlled. He won't shoot yet. "They give us sticks and stones to fight a hurricane. Either they get off on our pain or they don't care." Keep his attention a little longer.

"You're insane." He assumes an exaggerated firing stance, something he's seen on TV. "I was afraid of that. I'm sorry. I really am. You've suffered a lot, I'm sure, but you're not giving me a choice. We'll all be better off if... you can pray first, if you like."

"I don't have to pray."

Behind him. A massive shadow framed by rain. An enormous hand crushes the gun and then fingers. Bones crack like celery. Another hand clamps his neck. Snap. I back away and pick up the crowbar I had brought here. I set myself. Too tired to run. Too tired for tricks. Don't know if I can do this.

The giant lets "F's" body slump to the wet concrete. I ready myself. The creature ignores me. Bends over Michael's body. Fingers like sausages touch his chest, stroke his hair. It stands. Ten feet of twisted flesh. "A view to remember/The center is missing." Torn clothes, black, charred skin, blood running black in the rain. Smell of burnt hair. It's injured. Maybe I have a chance. It looks at me. There's rain in my eyes. There's something wrong with the shadows over its face.

"You should leave this place," I say loudly, hoping it can understand. I point at Michael's corpse. "Your master is dead."

It speaks. "You misunderstand. I am the master." I hear the words but their meaning seems to flow unchecked through my brain like water through a sieve, and then I'm falling down a long, dark tunnel into nothingness.

10-3

Shit. I should have seen this coming. I drove past her apartment this morning. The paper was down from the windows, the lights were on and I could see people inside. It looked like the landlord was showing the place to possible tenants. I made like I was a friend of Mary Ellen's who'd been out of town. The landlord said she'd moved out. Just up and left—that she shoved some cash under his door and was gone by the time he opened it.

I should have expected this. She's had a pattern of leaving for weeks at a time, and the disappearances have been getting longer. I could never follow her because of my own work. Now she's gone and I have no way to find her. What am I supposed to do?

MY LIFE IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about? This is the third night and nothing so far. I gotta tell you, we're starting to think we could be doing better things with our time, you know? Killing the enemy instead of killing time."

His name is Kyle or Kevin or something with a K. That much I'm sure of. He has two ways of passing time: chattering like a spider monkey or tapping his fingers on the dashboard. Never both at the same time. His fingernails are dirty. He's nervous but trying not to seem that way. He has a gun and thinks I don't know about it. The gun is under his shirt, stuffed into his pants. It always seemed so foolish to me when a man carried a gun like that, like on TV. Deadly force pointing at his own crotch. I look away from him and into the night that's wrapped around the car and ready to eat us. Once there were no nights, only days. Kevin or Kyle takes a sip of coffee. He stopped at a Starbucks before meeting me. A Starbucks. I focus on my breathing exercises. Breath equals life. *"The wind in my heart/ The dust in my head."* Life equals breath. He starts talking again.

"We're not a bunch of beginners, you know. Sure, we screwed up a couple times, but we really have our shit together now. We put a lot of nasty fuckers down." Another sip of coffee. An arpeggio across the steering wheel. "Somebody told me you've been hunting for, like, over a year now. That's a lot of nights." Sip. "What's it like after all that time? I bet you've seen some serious shit."

I ignore his profanity. I search for the fire in my belly, just below my rib cage. Things are not going well. After three nights of nothing, the fire is dying down. I have to feed it, stoke it, make it bigger, make it stronger. If I don't, I'll slip back to the bad days when just getting out of bed was painful.

Now Kyle is telling me how things are changing, how hunters are coming together and soon they'll overthrow the evil empire that's been enslaving humanity. He raises a debate about whether the enemy is aliens from another planet or supernatural monsters. When I say nothing, he argues with himself, taking one side and then the other. He and his group think it matters where the enemy comes from, why they're here, what their true

nature is. They don't realize that the only battle that matters is the one you're involved in at the moment.

"One night," I say, interrupting his tedious posturing, "I was in a town called Bethlehem, in Pennsylvania. I was bruised and tired and could barely walk. It was raining. I had to catch a bus in three hours, and I was afraid if I went to sleep somewhere, I wouldn't wake up in time. I saw a coffee shop and decided to go in. There were about 15 people sitting around waiting for someone to go on stage. I ordered some soup and sat in the back. A young girl stepped up to the microphone. She couldn't have been more than 20. She carried no instrument. She didn't introduce herself. She just started singing without accompaniment."

My voice is horse and monotonous, unpracticed, sing-songy, like I'm reciting from memory, which I am of course. I don't usually speak at length to other people. Words can be used against you, because you never know what else might be listening. When I pause, he turns toward me and stares, waiting for more. Kevin thinks I'm telling the story to him. I continue. "Her voice made the most exquisite music I'd ever heard. The pain faded. My injuries felt better. It was like a lullaby. Like being safe in bed while your mother tells you a story—"

My voice catches for a moment as an image of my youngest daughter's favorite bedtime storybook floats across my mind. Then I clear my throat and continue. "It was like a promise of peace. Like peace itself." I take a deep breath. "When I turned on the sight, I saw that the room was crowded with spirits — at least three for every person. They were all staring at the stage, listening to every note. Even the ones without faces — or heads — seemed to be in bliss. Then I looked at the singer. It wasn't her doing the singing. It was something tangled up inside her, working her like a puppet."

Kyle interjects with a slow whistle. "Shee-it. I didn't know they could do that. Somebody told me they could go along for the ride, you know? But not three or more."

"I waited after the place closed. Some of the girl's friends walked her home, but they turned to go their own way about a block before her apartment. As she opened the lobby door, I rushed in and knocked her down. I broke three of her ribs before the parasite left her body. Then I held it in place and impaled it. I watched it shiver apart like the proverbial pillar of salt. I left the girl crying on the floor. When I was a few blocks away, I stopped in an alley to vomit."

Keith turns to look out the windshield, his mouth opening and closing silently. His fingers aren't tapping anymore. For his benefit, I add, "That's what it's like."

The memory has done its work. The fire burns steady in me again. For now, anyway.

ROAD TO NOWHERE

I'm driving down a black highway. I can't drive fast enough. There aren't enough hours in the day to find

and hurt and kill everything I hate. Inside me, something hungry counsels me to be patient.

The child talking is C. "How'd you know about this car?" he asks. He still hasn't put on his seatbelt, even though I've told him to three times.

"Vincent told me about it," I answer. The conversation is wearing on me. The things inside me, the coiled snakes, are quiet, as if they're waiting for something. "It belongs to one of us who leaves it for others. You just have to bring it back with gas and some money." I'm tired of this endless questioning. But the first lesson every parent learns is patience. That lesson must be still with me, just buried.

"Who's Vincent? Your husband?"

I almost laugh at the contrast between Michael, who wouldn't hurt a fly, and Vincent, who considered everyone but himself to be an insect. How a daydreamer like Michael ever made it through law school.... I start to wonder where he might be now, but thinking of Michael only makes me weak, so I answer the question. "Vincent was a hunter I met shortly after I left home," I say, hoping my voice will keep the boy from filling the air with his. "He taught me a lot of things I needed to survive. Fighting, shooting, stealing. At first I thought he did it because he wanted to get into my pants. Later, I realized it was worse. He wanted to get into my head. He wanted to fill me with his ideas and make me into another version of him. It almost worked."

"So what happened to him?"

"He's dead. I killed him. Actually, something else killed him while I stood by and let it happen."

I hope my frankness will shock the boy into silence, but he doesn't miss a beat as he answers, "I guess you had your reasons."

PSYCHO KILLER

Awake. Grass. Where am I? Lying in front of Mary Ellen's house? Watching it burn down again? No. Daylight floods my eyes. Cool wind. C stands over me, calling for me to wake up. Eyes focus. Gray sky. Fence.

MY DAY AT THE PARK

by Amber K.

Class 3b

Fernville Elementary

I was in the Park on Saturday and then I was playing on the swings and then I went on the slide. And then a nice lady said, what's your name and she looked real funny and had on funny clothes and then I got reel sleepy. She said look at this amber and she show ed me the pretty pony toy and said I could hav it. and then a dog barked and barked and the ladey was gone and mom said it was time to cgo home I wish I hadd that pony. The ennd.

"Are you all right?" C asks me. Stupid question. He offers his hand. I ignore it and stagger to my feet. I'm still at the Trinity depot. C blinks at me.

"You've got another dead friend," I tell him. "A twitchy guy called 'F.'"

He nods. "Mister Franklin.... The... the newspaper. It said," he swallows, "there's another missing kid. Two or three towns over, in Jute."

Something catches my eye. An inky shape twisting in the breeze. I stare at it. "Not my concern," I answer.

"But—"

"It's not my problem," I say. Children disappear. Michael is dead. "*Facts are simple and facts are straight/ Facts are lazy and facts are late.*" Mary Ellen would care, but I don't. I'm close to the end. To some kind of end. A thin trail of smoke hovers in front of me. One length stretches back toward the depot. The other extends across the road and disappears. Did I lay the trail? Seems unlikely. Maybe it was a gift. Or a bribe.

C is staring at his feet. "I got another message this morning. About you. It said—"

"I don't care. I don't work for the voices. The Messengers. Whatever you want to call them. Not anymore." He comes toward me, opening his mouth to say something. My hand is around his throat before I can stop it. "You're their creature," I tell him. "Maybe if I kill you, it would hurt them." That would be fair. Satisfying. My mind is calm, but my body shakes with rage. I almost don't notice as he chokes, gasps for breath. His eyes bug out, watering. He doesn't struggle. Doesn't raise his arms. He's as limp as a rag doll. It would be easy. I feel my hand tightening, squeezing. His neck is hot.

It's not mercy that stops me. Not weakness or lack of resolve. It's something I can't name. Some kernel of Mary Ellen that's still deep inside me, not burned away, not yet. "This is why your masters chose you as their mouthpiece," I tell the boy. He falls. I check the sun. He coughs and gags and holds his throat. It's still early morning. The giant was badly injured. It couldn't travel far. I'll find it.

And I'll find Mary Ellen's babies. Not because I need them. Not because they need me. Because the "Messengers" don't want me to.

But when I find them, what then?

"I'm going into town," I tell C. "Don't follow me." And then some part of me adds, "Please, Calvin. Stay away from me."

LIFE DURING WARTIME

It's my fourth night in Quincy, keeping watch over the rail yard in Kevin's battered, smelly Nova. The situation is decaying. The fire in me is burning high. "Three-hundred-sixty-five degrees/Gonna burst into flame." I'm surprised there isn't smoke coming out of my ears. I'm itchy. I've got cramps. I want out of this rusted two-door tomb. I feel like I'm trapped in a

submarine 10 miles beneath the surface. I don't want to breathe the same air as this 25-year-old high-school drop-out. His rancid breath. His garlicky body odor. If he hadn't been imbued, Kyle would probably be spending his nights on someone's back porch poisoning himself with grain alcohol and narcotics. The car windshield is dirty with soot and bird droppings. Everything I touch is sticky or greasy.

Tonight is the last chance. Their leader, 'C,' the one they won't let me see, has convinced them. They refer to each other by initials, like characters in a James Bond movie. One last chance, and if the creature I've told them about doesn't show, I'm on my own. Why the ultimatum? Is something controlling this leader of theirs? Why is he trying to undermine me? I'll make Kyle tell me who C is. Wait till the end of the night, when he's tired. It will feel good. Burn off some energy. Teach him not to use profanity. I despise profanity. Make sure to take the gun away first.

Or maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe this is all for nothing. Maybe the monstrosity I'm looking for has already left town. It's smart - I know that - and mobile. It seems to favor travel by freight train, though sometimes it vanishes altogether and turns up somewhere else. I'll find it. I won't give up. When I think of pursuing it, something rises from my chest, becomes acidic in the back of my mouth and fights to rip its way through my throat. My palms sweat. The skin tightens on my forehead. There's a heat-shock in my stomach. It's the same feeling you get when you take something in your hands and have to squeeze until it cracks.

Dear Mary Ellen,

It's been three months now since my last letter. Your reply made it clear that you don't want to hear from me, but I've decided I can't let it end like that. I can't just sit idly by while you shut me out of your life. I know we've drifted apart since you got married. We haven't even seen each other since I moved to Provence. But you're my sister and you always will be. I want to be there for you. I think it was a mistake to not let us come to the funeral. I wish we'd flown in no matter what you said. I wish I'd been there to help you. When Henri and I talk about the children, I can't help but cry. I can't imagine the pain you went through, that you're still going through. Maybe you'd feel a little less pain if you had leaned on us.

You said you haven't spoken with Michael since the divorce. That's nearly two years ago. Two years. I don't understand. You two had such a strong relationship. I know that losing the children changed everything for both of you, but ignoring each other makes no sense. You needed each other then, and I think you still do. I remember Michael as such a sweet guy. Please consider talking to him. Just talking. It would be so good for both of you.

Please, Mary Ellen, write back. Call. Come and visit. I'll never give up on you. Let's be sisters again.

Love,
Sarah

No Compassion

I'm kneeling next to Keith as he whimpers and sobs. "I can't see," he says. His head is caved in like a piece of rotten fruit. I smell blood and brain. "Oh, God, it hurts. Momma? Help me."

He's the last one left. "*So wake up/Young lovers/The whole thing is over....*" I was right to use his group to test the monster's defenses. I learned valuable information. I watched each of them go down. I watched as 'M,' a bold linebacker-type, ran up behind the creature, swinging a fire-ax. I counted silently as the thing spun around (one second), grabbed him by the face (two seconds) and tossed him against a wall (three seconds). M didn't move after that.

Then I watched the other hunters move into position with nets and a shotgun. I heard them taunting the monster like children in a schoolyard. A few heartbeats later and they were all rolling on the ground, clawing at the barbs that had shot out of the creature's fingers and burrowed in their faces.

I got the best look at the thing I've had yet, after all the months I've been chasing it. It stands 10, maybe 12 feet tall, though it usually walks hunched over. Something's not right with its back. It has a kind of long, wrinkled coat that always seems wet with sweat or oil. Patches of matted hair, like dirty yellow worms, hang over its eyes and are clumped on its head and along its arms. Its almost skeletal hands are hooked into claws.

My face grows hot. I've seen those hands before. I've watched that distorted silhouette shuffle across my lawn. There's no doubt. This is the one.

This is the creature that took my children.

The giant moves among the dying hunters like a rat scuttling between piles of garbage. It hunches over each dying boy, whispering something in his ear and then twisting his head until his neck snaps.

I wait for the creature to turn its back on me. As it crouches over 'K' and grips his head in its hands, I picture my own children. Ethan's face. Chloe's voice. Amber's tiny hand in mine. I tighten my grip on my crowbar and almost feel it heat up with my anger. I plan the attack sequence in my head, just as Vincent taught me: in, strike, out. Three seconds.

Then, impossibly, K's arm flies up, holding a smoldering screwdriver. I smell burning meat as he shoves the tool into the creature's mouth and out the back of its neck. It howls and I cover my ears.

The monster staggers back, away from K, hesitant, disoriented. I come in at the correct angle, right in its blindspot, and slam my crowbar across its spine. It's like hitting a sack of cement. My shoulders flare with pain, but the monster drops to its knees. I feel the crowbar shaking, threatening to fly apart. "Ethan!" I yell. "Amber! Chloe! Those are their names! Are you listening to



me?" I feel feverish, electric, like a bolt of lightning about to strike the earth. I will not be stopped.

I should hit it again, but I feel invincible, drunk on the idea that this ugly thing is suffering. It spits out a gray tooth and then speaks. Its voice is like hair growing inside your ears. "Bad, bad, children," it says. Then, it is on its feet, not hurt at all. It turns around to look right at me. Its jaw, hanging on one hinge a moment ago, is now back in place and unfractured. "Punish," it says, spitting the word at me like an insult.

A wave of air, a stench of feces mixed with violets, ripples around me. It is foul but not harmful. I raise the crowbar to strike again, but the giant is already running. I reach out to grab it and it backhands me across the collarbone. I remember to protect my head and roll with the fall. The pads protect my knees but something on the ground gashes my thigh. It's happening again, I realize. It seems defeated, yet when I move in for the kill it grows strong again.

K's head lolls from side to side. His eyes look in different directions. I lean in to him. "Listen to me," I tell him. "Do you have any back-up? Do you know any others we can call in?"

"It said it was my mother.... Oh God, where is my mother? Where am I? Momma? Momma, is that you?"

"It's me," I lie, the words crawling from my throat like scorpions. "It's Momma. Can you feel my hand?"

"Quincy, Trinity, Jute," he says in a voice not his own, and he dies.

REMAIN IN LIGHT

C has led me to the outskirts of Bear Creek, which is a town that could pass for a swamp if it were a little cleaner. He won't tell me why we're here. I need to abandon him, to just leave him here and get on with what I have to do. But I can't. He's just a kid. He's incredibly smart, yes, but he lacks any common sense. His former friends knew it, too. That's why they were so protective of him. He has no one else. He lives in a trailer with an aunt and uncle whose combined IQ would make an impressive golf score.

I've said too much to him, though. I should just push him into a storm drain and be done with it.

But he's just a child. Hunter or not, he's a child.

I'll play his game for now. I'm not alone in this body. I have fierce aggressors growing inside me, feeding on my hate. I can feel them. I feel like I'll never need to sleep again.

"Any time now," he says, pointing to an uninteresting field covered with ragged grass and the odd car part. He shivers as the wind kicks up. He should be wearing a sweater. "Look," he says, and the way he says it tells me what he means. So I call on the sight and then I see it, too. Something rising out of the ground, then another, then another. They're hands, human hands, some close enough to see a ring on a finger or a watch on a wrist. Slowly, hands

lead to arms, arms lead to shoulders. "Seven times five/They were living creatures...." Heads appear. Torsos, legs. The transparent bodies are glowing, pulsing with color like the jellyfish you see on nature shows. The softly glowing ghost-bodies float upward, rotating slowly. The air is full of them. Dozens, then hundreds.

As they rise, the bodies flare brighter and lose their shape until they're not bodies at all but wheels of fire, stars of pure light. They orbit each other, filling the air with neon colors, rainbows of flame painted against the night sky. Some of the shapes meet and merge, mixing their glowing colors into spectacular fireworks. Others divide into showers of fragmented light that fire across the night like shooting stars. The orbs of light dance with each other, circling and turning and crossing. One passes close to us and I can almost make out a face within the blaze of violet. I don't know how much time has passed before there are noticeably fewer apparitions in the sky, and then I see that they're winking out, one by one, until there's nothing left but darkness again.

"How about that?" C says, and I hate his voice for breaking the silence.

"Why did you bring me here? What is this?"

"I don't know. I found it by accident, but it happens every 21 days. Like clockwork. I try not to miss it if I can help it. It's important to watch."

"And why is that?"

"Well, because... you know, it reminds me that people like us, we know the world ain't — uh, isn't — really the way everybody says it is. But that doesn't mean we know everything. Maybe we usually see the ugly side of things, but maybe there's more going on than even we know. If we keep trying to see the big picture instead of getting hung up on the ugly parts, we might be better off."

I don't answer him. I don't look at him. I don't want him to see the tear that's falling down my cheek. I'm hot and restless and there's fire all tangled and twisted inside me, and the tear feels like ice on my skin. I'm not crying because of his words. It's because I've just witnessed the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and all I can think about is how badly I want to destroy it.

AND SHE WAS

The tunnel is narrow. Barely room to move my arms. The floor and walls are curved, like a burrow. There's trash sticking out through the rocks and dirt. Plastic furniture, soup cans, diapers. Why a tunnel through the side of a landfill? How was it dug? It's always night below ground. Once there were no nights, only days. Sometime soon there will be no days, only nights. "There is water at the bottom of the ocean./Under the water/Carry the water...." The smoke trail is difficult to see. I have a camping flashlight on a strap around my head, but the batteries are dying. It took too long to get the things I needed. I don't feel so good. Not sure what I'm doing

here. No fire in me. No vipers of flame. What if they're not there when I need them?

The trail finally ends. The tunnel widens. There's a pile of trash and a huge foot jutting out from behind it. Its toenails are curved like coat hooks. Elbow like an elephant's trunk. The globe of a head. The giant is curled like an enormous fetus, sleeping almost without breathing, its hands pressed tight over its eyes. The burns still haven't healed.

I work quickly. Open the cans. Pour them out. Reach for the—

A blur of motion. I snap to attention. The creature is awake. It bolts upright, its head bulging with oozing abscesses. It sniffs at the air like a hyena. Even though it will give me away, I train the thin light from my headlamp across its body. I realize for the first time that the giant is female. I see a shriveled breast through a tear in its coat.

And then I realize the giant is blind. No eyes. Just smooth, pink flesh.

It speaks, mouth like a gash across a melon. Teeth like rusted nails. Its voice is the exact opposite, though: cultured, beautiful, like an opera singer's. Not raspy like before at all. "You have something to tell me, child," it says. She speaks with the perfect diction of an English professor.

"Maybe you smell the kerosene. You're doused with it. This whole chamber is soaked. I'm holding a lit road flare—"

"I hear it burning."

"The instant I feel threatened, the flare hits the floor and we all go up. I don't care how fast you can move, you won't get to me in time. Believe me."

"I believe you, dear child," she says. "I know you. I know you've been following me, trying to stop my work. You don't make idle threats. But if your goal is to kill me, why haven't you done it? You have something to say to me. I will listen. Now, put out the flare and come here."

"Try that again," I tell her, "and it's all over."

"Very well.... My name is Marcella."

"I don't care." I'm shaking a little. It's okay. I wonder for a moment if the gas vapors alone in here can ignite from the torch.

"I know who you are, Mary Ellen. I know why you've come here."

My face is growing hot. "You don't know anything," I think to myself. "I'm not Mary Ellen anymore. I hate you. I'll kill you. Do it now. Throw the flare at the thing's face."

I ask a question instead, "Where are the children?"

THE OVERLOAD

I'm in one of those Wal-Mart/K-Mart places. Needed new tools. Pulled out of that last town pretty quick and had to leave a few things behind. Hate these places. They're huge. Not designed on a human scale. They wanted to build one in our town. We fought it. Not in our

neighborhood. No blue-collar, white-trash traffic-drawing crap-mongers near our homes, thank you. We fought with paper and lawyers and convinced them to build elsewhere. The Mary Ellen I was then was proud of that fight. The Mary Ellen I was then thought it mattered.

I'm looking for the hardware department. Really. I have no reason to be looking at children's toys. I know to avoid those aisles. "Walk lightly/think of a time...." But I got lost and here I am, confronted by bikes and wiffle-ball bats and RC cars. I see a shelf full of plastic dinosaurs. Nail-toothed killers with jointed legs and tails. The kind Ethan couldn't get enough of. One large T-Rex is just like the one Michael gave to Ethan on his eighth birthday. I pick it up. I put it down. I turn to leave and then I see Ethan.

Heart pounding. Dizzy. I try to call his name. My voice won't come. He stares at me. Blue eyes of an angel. Blond hair of his father. I run to him. I nearly stumble. "Ethan," I choke at last, "it's me!" He backs away. I clamp my hands on his shoulders and say, "Ethan, it's Mommy. Listen, we have to hurry. We have to get away from here, sweetie. You and me, we have to...."

But something happens. Suddenly it isn't Ethan's face I'm staring into. It's some other 10-year-old's. Dark hair, fat cheeks, nothing like Ethan. It never was Ethan, and it's happened again. Like the time on the bus when I heard someone mention Ethan and Chloe's names. I followed them home, broke into their house and pretended I was a burglar looking for crack money. But they had nothing to tell me. They were nothing but scared, ordinary, harmless, stupid people.

Fortunately, this boy is the kind who goes quiet when scared, instead of screaming. I want to tell him I'm sorry, to wipe his tears, but he's sobbing and about to find his voice. I turn and walk away quickly, careful not to move so fast that I attract attention, even though I want to run and run and never stop.

Ethan and Amber and Chloe — my babies — are gone. They're out there somewhere beyond my reach. The monster that took them is gone, too. I messed up my first real opportunity to get her and punish her and hurt her and make her tell me what she did with them. I don't know where she's gone or where she'll surface next to do her hateful work. All the running and hiding and fighting and killing has achieved exactly and only this: me sleeping in my clothes on a stained mattress in a trash heap called the Sleepy Moon Motel, too broken inside to even cry.

The fire's out. I give up.

I think I'll stay in bed tomorrow.

11-21

So, the 'office' has sent me to this little nowhere town called Trinity. So far it's been a waste of time. When I got to the hotel, I found a message saying that there'd been a change of plans and I should hole up there until I got further instructions. That's not the way the note put it, but that was the gist of it. The whole situation was annoying. I actually considered complaining. I was so

irritated. But I came to my senses, of course. If they want me to hang around in some crappy town for a week or whatever, I'll do it.

It's just the timing. Some weird shit has happened here. I wish I hadn't picked up the local paper. A few weeks ago, three kids went missing during a school picnic. They think they wandered into some local caves and couldn't find their way out. Besides it being awful in itself, reading about it made me think of my own kids. God, I miss them. I usually try not to think about them because it's too painful, but reading about this incident has brought it all back. I spent the day in my hotel room trying not to bawl out loud.

Tomorrow, the office is supposed to call with new instructions. I'll get to meet my 'supervisor' face-to-face for the first time. I'm nervous about that. What if I just skipped town tonight and kept going, driving until the money ran out and then took some easy job as a dishwasher or something? Stupid idea.

They'd find me.

SLIPPERY PEOPLE

The three of them look human now that I've cut their throats. Out during daylight, wrong to the sight, bleed when you cut them... my guess is that they were puppets. Slaves to the drinkers. Used to be hardest type to kill. There was always the temptation to try and save them. I'm over that.

But I was sloppy. I got carried away by emotion. They deserved to be punished, true, but I should have left one alive to question. Why were they skulking around the Trinity depot? I followed them for three hours, nine till noon, and watched them break into a freight car up on blocks. Why? Should've stopped to think. Instead, I lit up a cigarette, drew it deep into my lungs and felt the smoke mix with the fire deep inside me. Then it was easy to spit out the darkness and send it to surround and blind them. After that — slit, slit, slit. Felt good. "A world of light/She's gonna open our eyes up...."

Only now I'm left in a train car full of junk. Paperbacks with the covers ripped off. Housedresses and mismatched socks. Bent cutlery. Band-Aids. I kick through the trash. No, it's not quite trash. Too clean. Too new. More like a collection. I bend down to sift more carefully. Someone brought this here. Why? Picture frames with the remnants of ripped-out photographs. A toaster still filled with crumbs. Teddy bears and stuffed rabbits. A plastic wall clock. A shoebox....

The shoebox is full of pictures. I toss them to the floor, a tumble of colors, smiles and gestures. One catches my eye, but it's too dark in here to get a good look at it. I slip on my flashlight and run it across the pile. And then.... And then.... And then my hands shake and my knees turn to water. I'm on the floor, on all fours, pulling one photo into the dim light, then another. Then another.

Amber. Chloe. Chloe and Ethan. Ethan. Ethan and Amber. My children. My children. They look back at me from the pictures. I press one to my cheek, to my forehead. It's real. I gather the photographs together and I can't look at them fast enough. I flip from one to another and I've looked at about 20 of them when I realize what's wrong.

These *are* my children, but they're wearing clothes I never bought them. They're standing in some house I don't recognize. Amber's hair is different. It's been styled, waved. I never fixed it like that. Chloe sitting on a horse, smiling at the camera. I never gave her a ride on a horse. Ethan looks... different. He — he's, my God, he's changed. He's older. Taller. Thinner. He's not the same boy I knew. I turn one of the pictures over. The date — just a few months ago.

These are pictures of my children. They're alive. I want to be happy that I've seen their faces. But they're leading lives I know nothing about. They're growing and changing and living somewhere else, without me, without knowledge of me, without contact with me. They're living in somebody else's house. I stand and my hands crush the photos, rip them to shreds, fling them to the ground. Someone else is raising my children.

The fire flares inside me, burns into my chest, my throat, my head. Something squirms and twists under my skin. My children. Keeping them from me. I raise my arms, ready to cast out a flash of destruction. Snakes of pure fire. My breast fills with venom. Burn, I'm thinking, burn and bite and poison and kill.

"Are you alright?"

I turn and C is standing in the doorway. *Burn him, a voice seems to whisper. Is it my voice? He's holding you back. He's slowing you down. See what power you can call on.* I raise my hands toward the boy. The voices, the so-called Messengers, wanted him to find me. To spy on me? They think I won't hurt him. *Wouldn't it be best for him to die now? He'll never have a normal life. He'll never go on dates or get married or get a job. He's doomed to a miserable few years of poking at coffins and staking out cemeteries until something with teeth finally catches him and kills him — or worse.*

If only he would back away, turn and run, I know I would kill him. But he stands there, facing me, waiting. I push the fire back down. I lower my arms. "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay in town!"

"I was worried. You were gone so long. I thought I should see if you were okay."

Behind him, the sun has nearly set. It was barely past noon when I entered this train car. How long have I been here?

"I told you I didn't want you here." My body feels like it's cooling down. I need to think. My babies—

"I know, but I got tired of waiting. I got curious. I wanted to see what—" He climbs into the car. He sees the bodies. The red light of the setting sun makes the blood look almost black. "Are..." he stammers, blinking, "are they dead?"

"Yes," I tell him. "They're dead." I clamp a hand on his shoulder and pull him completely into the car. "Look at them. *Look at them!*" I push him to his knees. He tries

to scramble backward from the corpses but I don't let him. "*Look at them!* This isn't a game! This isn't a movie! They're dead because I killed them. I cut their throats while they couldn't see. That's their blood all over the floor. This is their blood on my hands. They would have killed me if they saw me first, and they would have waited to kill you. Their friends are out there somewhere, and I don't care if your buddies sheltered you before. If you don't stop treating this as if it's some kind of puzzle to solve, you're going to end up like this. Do you understand?"

I let go of his shoulder and he tries to push himself up, away from the corpses. When his hands touch the floor, he feels the wet stickiness and he pulls them away. He brings his hands toward his face, stares wide-eyed at the blood and dirt on them, and lurches to his feet without touching the floor again. He sniffs and gurgles. I can tell he's trying not to cry as he says, "Okay... I... okay, I see. I see. Can we... I want to get... away from here."

GROSSEYED AND PAINLESS

"Your children are well," she says, cocking her head as I lower the flare a little closer to the ground. "They are well cared for and happy."

They're not happy. They couldn't be happy.

I tense up as this freak says my name. My old name. That's not me anymore, right? "Mary Ellen," it repeats. "This will be hard for you to accept, but you must know that I regret what has happened to you, to your husband, to your lives."

"You ugly piece of shit," I sputter. "How dare you say that."

"It's true, child. Michael served me well. I grew fond of him. He deserved better. Please understand, not all that has transpired is according to my will. Even such as I have masters whom she cannot deny. Edicts she cannot break... ahhh..." Suddenly her voice loses its smoothness. It trails off into something like a wheeze.

Michael was her dog, I finally understand. Her seeing-eye-dog.

"Tell me," I tighten my grip on the flare. Not yet. Not yet. "Tell me why you took them. Tell me now."

"It is not something... easily explained. Your children... they are with us now. They are needed. The end times... the red star is rising... drastic measures... not safe here, a dancer is coming..."

"You're talking gibberish. Where are they? Answer me!"

I shake the flare. She looks right at me with milky eyes, her mouth pulled taut in a grimace. I step sideways. Her face is like an ugly wound. Arms and legs twisted and pitiful. Her back hunched. Huge flaps of skin hang ragged along her sides. I see muscles, ribs. Dried blood everywhere. "*All that blood/Gonna swallow you whole...*" How can anything be alive with such horrendous injuries? Startled, I feel the flare tumble from my grasp. It



turns end over end, falling toward the kerosene-soaked ground. I reach out. The flare stops hissing. It hovers in the air. The light changes. And time...

Stops.

There's a presence behind me. I turn slowly. The shadow man from the motel is here. I can make out his face this time.

"Vincent," I say.

Now

Now. Now. Now. I understand what's happening. Time melts, fractures, and Mary Ellen Kramer is burning. The white flames lick away her skin. Stroke off her hair. Kiss away her eyes. Agony/fear/confusion burn off like a morning fog. What's left of her is me. As I join with the flames, I realize that time is a suggestion, an option, not an absolute. Thoughts jump between different segments of her life. I live in each moment like a nautilus coiled in its shell. Who is there with me, watching? Words fly from my mind like birds. Where will they come to rest? I know only my need to tell the story. Flames part like a curtain. I push myself back into disordered fragments of Mary Ellen's past.

SEEN AND NOT SEEN

I've been watching them for an hour. Don't want to get too close. There are two. A thin man dressed casually, acting nervous and constantly looking around. With him is the giant, its deformities obvious even at this distance. It walks as if one leg were shorter than the other, and its misshapen head tilts to one side. When it passes under one of the feeble security lights, I can see strange lumps along its back, pushing up under its coat. Its hands seem overly massive, even for its size. It's raining. Rain will mask my scent. Muffle my sounds.

The small man directs the giant's actions. I think it's his bodyguard, his muscle. He puts his hand on the monster's back and nudges it this way and that. He tugs on its arm and the creature follows. They're obviously searching for something. Sometimes the giant feels the ground with its hands, or places an ear to the dirt. I have an idea what they're looking for.

They come to the freight car and slip inside, with the man sending the giant in first. They won't find the three bodies. I've moved them. I can't see inside the car,

Michael,

I will come three hours after sunset. We will go together to the Trinity depot. We will search for three pawns of our enemies. Study the enclosed pictures carefully so that you recognize them. Speak to no one. See no one. Do not leave your room until I come. The enemy is near.

Marcella

but I don't want to risk moving right now, so I wait. Not long after, they exit and I watch as they speak to each other. Suddenly, the giant stands to its full height and cocks one ear toward the sky. Freeze. I don't breathe. They've found me. But no, the giant bends toward its master and then is gone — running in the opposite direction from me, moving impossibly fast. I wait five minutes, watching, listening. Ten minutes. Fifteen. The man leans against the car, waiting.

I move closer.

I'm behind the freight car. I press the fire from my center. I let it stream into my muscles, deep into my arms and legs, filling them with strength and speed. I'll hit him hard and fast and see if he falls. If he gives me trouble, I'll cast out the vipers and laugh while they eat him. I feel unbeatable. No one can stand in my way. I look underneath to see his feet. When I can tell he's facing the other direction, I come around the car and then I see him fully. He's wrong to the sight. That's obvious. I see it right away. In the next second, I can tell that he's not much of a threat. He stands with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched, nervous, wishing he was anywhere else but here. I'll so enjoy hurting him. I wait to see his face before I rush him. "Why don't we pretend/There you go/Little man...."

He turns around and I'm looking into the face of my husband.

THANK YOU FOR SENDING ME AN ANGEL

The human skeleton is a beautiful thing. It shouldn't be hidden by too much flesh. My mother used to tell me that. Her funny way of urging me not to take that third helping at dinner. Thank, Mom.

Maybe she'd be proud of me now. I haven't eaten in three days. Only water. But it's not what you think. It's not depression. I know what I'm doing. "We are born without eyesight/We are born without sin...." When I was a kid, my mother would look at me in this certain way and cluck her tongue when I walked toward the kitchen. Then I knew that I was getting too fat, too disgustingly fat. That I was flooding my body with too many calories and the only solution was to stop the flow of food into my gut. I learned then how hunger comes on like a wolf, ravenous, tearing at you, but if you hold on long enough it backs away and stares at you from the rim of your awareness.

I tried that again a year ago. I learned to breathe out the darkness before it was over.

When I was a teenager, refusing food wasn't really about calories or body mass, it was about control, about proving that nobody could make me do what I didn't want to. Not my parents, my sister, my doctor. Not anybody. If they wanted me to do something, they had to give me a reason. They had to make it worth it to me. This time it's not my family I want to punish. It's the bastards who've shoved their awful burning fire into my gut.

If you want me to do your dirty work, give me something. I need a new trick. I can't kill this thing that shoots poison knives from its fingers and that won't stay down when I hit it. I know this is the monster that took my children, and if I make it suffer it will give them back. Then everything will be right again.

And then time passes and I want to tell the voices I'm sorry. Sorry I was angry. Please, don't abandon me now. I need you. I'll be good please....

And then I don't know if it's day or night, hot or cold, Coke or Pepsi, when I hear the squeak of a door opening and some ordinary footsteps clomping toward me. The chair is empty. Only when I look from the corner of my eye do I see a shadowy figure sitting in it, leaning with his elbows on his knees, head cocked. I should be afraid, I know. Is he one of the voices made real? This hasn't happened before.

He sits, patiently.

"Okay," I croak at last. "What do you want to know?"

11-28

It's all about Mary Ellen.

They told me the truth last night. I mean, they told me some of the truth. I guess I'm not sure what I mean. They seemed nervous, if you can believe that. Something about a 'dancer' being in the area. Fear of choreography? I must be losing my mind.

They've been reading my diary all along. I guess that means they'll read these words too, eventually. Should I burn this notebook? Stop writing altogether? They told me they've been using me to keep tabs on Mary Ellen. That's why they sent me to Trinity, because they think Mary Ellen might show up here. They want me to watch for her, observe her. My supervisor will meet me here and work with me personally.

Why are they interested in her? What could she be mixed up in that would get their attention? How stupid am I? I've avoided contact with her all this time, thinking she could start fresh after I ruined her life. Instead, I've been giving them access to her. I'd pray to God that Mary Ellen doesn't turn up here, except I know there is no God, or if there is there's no reason for Him to answer the prayers of someone like me.

STOP MAKING SENSE

This isn't Michael, obviously, it can't be. There's no reason for him to be here, sneaking around the Trinity depot in the rain with a giant at his heel. It makes no sense. It's out of context, like finding an apple in a toilet. It's a trick, some kind of trick. One that works even though I'm looking at him with the sight full on.

Except... except the first thing he does when he sees me is put one hand over his heart. A stupid, involuntary gesture, as if his heart was literally in danger of stopping. Just like Michael, always so melodramatic, his brain filled with so many images from bad movies and mediocre TV that their clichés have soaked into his nervous system.

The shock of seeing his face has drained the fire right out of me. My muscles are cold and heavy, but

the sight still tingles in my eyes. And I realize, if... if... this is really Michael, he's tainted. He's wrong. He's got something in him, some stain of the evil that owns this world.

"Oh God," he says. "Oh God, it's you. Oh God." He takes a step forward, then a half step back, and presses his hands together as if he's praying. His body doesn't know what to do. "Mary Ellen," he says, finding his voice. He walks up to me. "Mary Ellen, you have to get out of here. It's not safe. You don't understand. It's not safe for you here."

His words stun me like body blows. After everything that's happened, there's concern for me in his voice. I can't process it. It's as if he's speaking a foreign language. And now that an unknown element has appeared, I should be running, not thinking. I tell myself this isn't Michael. It's just some stranger in the wrong place. I want to threaten him, frighten him. But instead I say, "What you're doing here?"

He's crying. He backs away. "It's all shit, Mary Ellen, everything's just gone to shit and it's because of me. Oh, there's no point in trying... I can't—you won't... oh, God."

He looks like he's about to fall over. I take him by the shoulders and we both go lower until we're sitting on the cold concrete. "Michael," I say, because maybe it really is him, maybe I want it to be him. "Please, just talk to me. Don't think. Don't try to make sense. Let the words come. Just talk. Tell me."

"I've imagined this so many times, you know," he almost laughs. "Seeing you again and just telling you everything. And now I'm not sure I can do it."

I need to get him out of here before the giant comes back. But before I can do that, I have to calm him down. I stroke his hair, hoping my hands won't shake. "Shhh," I tell him, "you can do it. Catch your breath."

"Do you think it's your fault?" he almost whispers. "The kids. Do you blame yourself because you survived the fire and they didn't? Listen, Mary Ellen... *they weren't in the fire.*" He wipes his eyes and puts his hands on my cheeks. "They were already gone. That wasn't them in the fire. The funeral was a lie. It was all lies!"

I feel as if I'm falling. I feel as if the world is flying past me, too fast for me to grab hold. I have to sort this out. What is he saying? What does he know?

"You think I'm crazy," he tells me, shaking his head. "Please, honey, hold my hand. I know this sounds crazy, but please, God, believe me. The kids weren't in that fire. They're still alive. I want you to know that. I've wanted to tell you for so long. They're still alive!"

His hand feels like ice to me. I can almost see the taint smeared under his skin, like the trails of a slug. He's not Michael anymore, I tell myself, but the idea won't penetrate my brain. "Do you...." I have to take a deep breath before I can ask the question. "Do you know where they are?"

"They're okay," he says, staring off into the distance. "They're living comfortable lives, they... they're living better than they did with us. They have the best of everything, Mary Ellen. They're together and they... I get pictures of them every so often. I was supposed to get a whole box of pictures today... I...." He begins to sob again. But I won't cry. I won't. I pull him toward me. I feel his body shake as I hug him. "I'm so sorry," he gasps. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," I say to him. "It's really not...." I don't know who's talking, if it's me or someone pretending to me. I talk without choosing my words. "It was because of me," I tell him. "They did it because of me. They did it because of what I had become, to get back at me for fighting them. Oh, Michael...." I try to stop the words now, but it's futile. "Oh, baby, I brought danger into our house, and I so wish to God it had never happened. I don't know why it happened but there are monsters out there and I started to see them, and Goddamn whatever it is that made me see them." I'm not crying, am I? Somebody's body is shaking, doing something in the place of crying. Is it mine?

Michael pulls from our embrace so he can look at me. "You... I don't understand.... You knew about... you knew about the kids?"

"I came home that night, and... I saw it taking them. I had to do something. In the struggle, the fire started..."

He backs away and his face is a mask. "Oh, God," he says flatly. "Oh my God."

My numbed brain struggles to awaken. "Michael," I tell him, "Michael, wait. How did you know the truth?" There's a buzzing in my ears. "How did you know the children weren't dead?"

He backs away from me now, scrambling like a crab. "They made me do it! I... I promised them.... You didn't know. I didn't tell you how badly my practice was doing. We were going under, Mary Ellen, and I'd been taking money from clients. I would have gone to jail. They gave me the money to make everything right. Years went by. I didn't think they'd ever call me on it—but then they told me I had to give up the kids. Mary Ellen, you don't know what they are. You don't know what they would have done if I didn't obey."

I'm squatting now, ready to stand in an instant. My hand hovers near my knife. "Michael—are you saying—are you saying you gave up our children to those things?" Angry. *Get angry and do it.*

"It was only supposed to be temporary!" He screams the words, then screams again. "It was meant to be just for a week! Don't you understand? They were going to test them or something. Oh, my God...." His body seems to sag. "When the fire happened..." he says, his voice lowered to a whisper. "When the house burned and everyone thought our kids were dead, that's when

they decided they had to keep them. Because... because there would be too many questions if... if they turned up alive."

I stand. There is no fire in me.

"I didn't know," I whisper. "They were taking my children...." I don't know if Michael is even listening. Someone is whispering to me. *You're not angry enough. This is your moment. Don't wait. Take your revenge. Now. Now.* But everything is tangled. Michael's actions. My actions. Monsters. Voices. Fires. Lies. Were they lying to him? Would they really have brought my babies back? *"We are vain/And we are blind."* I'm complicit. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to react. We went to our children's funeral, each thinking we knew the truth but hiding it from the other. I don't want anymore truth. I want to live under the shelter of lies again.

I feel myself shattering into little pieces.

Then I hear a gun go off.

WILD WILD LIFE

My body is still in the motel room, tangled in the cords of space and time, but my mind has broken free, spinning like a wheel, and I'm telling the shadowed man about the first weeks after my eyes were opened. My words put me there. I'm with three others who are touched, and we're stupid enough to think we're getting the hang of it. We raid a tunnel where two pathetic flesh eaters are hiding. I chase one that's slipped past us. It's trapped against a fence. I raise an aluminum softball bat and just feel charged. But then the creature is gone and in its place is a little girl. I know it's a trick, but I hesitate long enough for the monster to jump the eight-foot fence and scramble away. The bat cracks as I stare slack-jawed and useless.

The shadowy man seems to nod his head. "You want me to go on?" I say. "Okay. Later that night, I'm walking back to my house and I see.... I'm walking through our backyard, rolling down my sleeves so the sitter won't see my injuries. I'm almost at the back door when I hear voices. I can't make out the words, but the hair on my neck and arms stands on end. It's Chloe's voice. She's frightened." I go on to tell the rest of it.

The cellar door opens.

A shape is silhouetted against the night sky. A twisted giant. Hands like claws. Clouds pass from the moon and I see disjointed glimpses of the creature's body: A yellow fang. A pink, scarred ear. Nostrils flared like bat wings. The monster takes the steps up in one stride, followed by three tiny figures lost in its shadow. My children. They move like sleepwalkers.

The beast speaks. "Come, children. Don't be frightened. I'm here. Mother's here."

I move forward and scream something. Probably not words at all. The monster seems to shrug, a casual gesture that sends me sprawling. I try to stand, but I trip over my

own feet and fall down the steps to the open cellar door. I hear the voice again somewhere outside. "That's right, my children. This way. We're going to have a grand time."

The basement is unfinished. One of Michael's projects. Always "next on the list." Never actually started. The floor is cold. Dusty. I have to stand. I'm so tired. When I feel something wrap itself around my ankle, there's a feeling of inevitability. *Of course, I think.* There's another one waiting for me down here.

Remembering these things awakens the fire in me, the burning heat that grows deep in the core of my being. Three times in my life, microscopic cells have divided and divided and divided to form a tiny person.

The shadow man seems darker, and now there are deep shadows filling the corners of the room like cobwebs. I've been talking for hours now. I taste blood.

I think I pass out. Now I'm awake again. The shadow stands at the foot of my bed. I can look right at him and he doesn't vanish, though I can see the cracked motel walls through his smoky body. Then there's a spin of the world and I'm lying on the grass outside our house, my lungs burning, the night air waving across my face. Memories fight for my attention. An animal smell in the dark. The feral thing clawing at me. A surge of impossible strength. The furnace cracking open. I watch walls of flame shoot up the sides of our home. Through a window, I see fire dance across our new sofa. *"The world crashes in/Into my living room...."* I crawl. My left leg won't work. Pain in my side. Hard to breathe. I'm dying.

The pain recedes and I'm back in the motel. In his left hand, the shadow man holds fire. I look closer and see that the flames are actually fiery serpents, twisting around each other, hissing and rattling and spitting. The blood-red light they cast does nothing to illuminate the shadow that holds them. The sounds they make are like whispering: *How much do you hate?*

He holds the twisting knot of snakes toward me. I push myself off the bed, stand shakily, and raise my hand to accept his gift. Then I see that the snakes are biting each other, biting him. I flinch, but before I can get away the vipers shoot from his hand into mine, sliding under my skin. Nausea shakes my body and I'm on hands and knees next to the bed, sick. The world around me twists back into a small, moldy room with particle-board furniture and ugly carpeting.

"Quincy," I remember. "Then Trinity, then Jute...."

There's a knock. Without thinking, I stumble to the door and open it. I lean against the doorjamb in a stupor. In the hall is a young boy — 12, maybe 13. I stare, wiping blood from my nose. He tilts his head slightly to the side and says, "You must be Mary Ellen."

GIVE ME BACK MY NAME

The shadow man — Vincent, I finally realize — is made of smoke and shadow, but he still has the same

Sasha

I am no longer sure about this course we've taken. Gathering lost kin and cubs will make the tribe stronger, I know, but to do it like this. Perhaps the thought of raising one of them as my own, of cheating my sterility, made me agree too readily. Do you know that I take meaningless trinkets from their homes? I touch them, hoard them, carry them like fetishes and envision myself living the dull, circumscribed life of a human mother. That's how much I've come to despise this outcast's life I've been born into.

Tonight I'm going to confront the "nuisance" that's been following me. I'll need to take extra care, because the Dancer is near, hunting me as I hunt him. I must kill him soon or he will have his revngee for Lisbon. More later.

I don't know if I will live. Things have gne bdy. Enemy near. I pursued. Ambush. Burned me. Escaped, weak. M dead. No allies. Tired. Rest nw, hpe to wke strng. If not, hpe you will find my bones, + ths mssge.

Think you fr bng my frnd + sister, Sasha, despite what I am.

Marcella

smirk he always did. "Now let me tell you a story," he half-sings. "The devil he has a name...." His mouth seems to be full of spider webs. "Well," he says then, "It's been a long time." His voice is not quite in synch with the movement of his shadowy lips.

"You don't scare me," I say to him.

"I know," he answers. "I don't want to. I'm not here to settle old scores, if that's what you think. That's all meaningless to me now. Besides, you and I are not the people we were the last time we saw each other."

"And who are you now?"

"Think of me as your midwife, one who's been appointed to see you through your second birth. You're almost through now. Almost ready to start a new life."

"Appointed? By who?"

"Tell me, right now, quickly. What is your deepest desire? What do you want more than anything?"

I pause, then answer. "The children. My... Mary Ellen's children."

"Come, now. You've left Mary Ellen behind. Let go of her limited ambitions. What is it you really want?"

I stare at the ground like a child called before an angry parent. "The voices. I want to hurt them. I want — I want to hear them scream."

Vincent nods. "That's right. That's right. And we — the powers I represent — can show you how to do it."

Inside me, something moans softly, relaxing its grip as it anticipates freedom. "But... but what—"

"What do we want in return? The same thing you've always wanted. Dead monsters. But we won't string you along like a dog begging for treats. We'll give you all the tools you need, and then some. Haven't you already been given our gift? All you have to do is use it."

He points. I turn to face the giant, frozen like a monument. "Kill that thing," Vincent says. "Call on the serpents. Have them spit their fiery venom. Let them entangle and constrict and end its pitiful existence. Let it die, suffering. Then you'll be on the way to even greater power."

I stare at the monster and my eyes settle on its clawed hands — again. An animal's hands, really. A predator's hands. So much larger than my own.

"Do it, you who once was Mary Ellen Kramer. Claim a new name and new power. It's not like you've never changed before, is it? In college, you thought you'd be a nonconformist for the rest of your life, listening to underground rock and cranking out pretentious poetry. Yet 10 years later, you were a soccer mom obsessed with window treatments and pasta salads. Then you became a warrior in darkness. Now's your chance to transform again. But act quickly. Another enemy is approaching. One who will rip through you to kill this beast. Do it now and we'll take you away from here."

I'm paralyzed, remembering the last time I saw those hands. They were stroking Michael's hair, touching his face. I realize now the feelings they expressed. Tenderness. Grief. Regret. Maybe it was a show for my benefit. She must have known I was there. But even as a feint, it was more emotion than I was able to raise for the father of my children, for the man I shared a bed with for years. And when I realize that, I realize I want to be Mary Ellen again. Even the tired, lonely, frightened Mary Ellen who's been hollowed out by a life of futile violence.

"Vincent," I say, "your masters, whoever they are, chose the wrong ambassador. I look at you and I remember who I used to be. I think I'd rather be that than what you want me to become. Than what you've become."

And then he's gone.

The flare tumbles toward the ground.

BORN UNDER PUNCHES

Almost the instant I catch the flare, I feel the pain in my stomach. I fall to my knees, trying to keep the torch over my head, as something pushes its way out of me, up my throat, into my mouth. It feels cold and tastes metallic. I gag and retch and choke until I feel it slither past my teeth and lips. I'm certain that I can't open my mouth any further, that my jaw will break, when suddenly the pressure eases. I expect to see an anaconda as thick as a sewer pipe drop from my mouth, but I can only make out a nearly transparent contour, a kind of dusky smear of air that winds away from me and down the dim tunnel.

I feel better, clear-headed. There are no curling rivals nesting within the boundaries of my skin. Only familiar fire, burning steadily, waiting patiently even though I've turned my back on the ones who put it there.

For a psychotic widow, trapped God-knows-how-many-feet underground in a kerosene-soaked tunnel with a 12-foot monster, I'm doing okay.

I regard the thing. I make myself say her name. "Marcella." She lies on her back, her head twitching. A pool of dark blood has formed under her. I see that the wounds are even more extensive than I thought. She makes nonsense sounds. I kneel beside her, bite back revulsion and fear, and lean toward a ragged ear almost as big as my palm.

"I don't know if you can hear me," I say.

"*Mamma, mamma, por favor não me deixa aqui. Eu não quero permanecer com eles. Eu estou receoso...*" Her voice is small. Girlish. Neither the controlled tones nor the rasping snarls I've heard before.

"Listen," I say. "Listen, we can't stay here. It's dangerous. Something's coming, I don't know what...."

She makes more delirious sounds that I can't interpret.

"I don't know what to do anymore. We have to make some kind of deal. You and me. Get it?" My hand hovers above her wrist. I can't bring myself to touch her. "It's all I can think of. To do the one thing neither side wants me to do." I have to wipe tears from my eyes. "All I want is for them to be safe. My babies. That's all I want. I can't take care of them. They won't be safe with me. I can't even get to them, but you can and...." Oh God. Michael is dead. Focus. "My sister — Sarah. She lives in France. She could take them. You have to...." Was that a noise? Somewhere else, somewhere nearby? I can't tell. "I'm so tired of being an outsider, a monster." I'm babbling. "I can't think of anything else to do but what neither side wants." Should I try to drag her out of the tunnel? She doesn't seem as big as I thought. How much does she weigh?

Then I know something has arrived. A hulking, hyena-headed nightmare. Fanged and clawed. Maurice Sendak on acid. A killer beast with burning eyes and a huge dripping knife in one hand. Its nostrils flare as it tips back its head and breathes the close air of the chamber. "Ah," it says with a voice like a forest full of bears, "found you."

No time to think. No time to plead or bluff. I raise my arm. The gesture is the truest, most certain movement I've made in my whole life. What erupts from inside me isn't the cold, pure light I experienced while facing down F's pistol, or the twisting flame-snakes that the shadow-man gave me. Some part of me tears loose. A flare of energy leaps out like forked lightning. It scorches the air like a welder's torch and



strikes the monster. The creature howls like twisted metal. Oily smoke rises from its burning fur and it staggers back, crying.

"And when they split those atoms/It's hotter than the sun..." It feels like the ground is shaking. I'm pushed backward by a recoil, breathless, my teeth aching, my hands and feet numb. The beast-thing staggers forward and snarls. I do it again. This time, the force knocks me off my feet. I stagger upright. The monster is lying on its back, motionless. The air is thick with burnt hair and flesh. My neck is sore. My eardrums are throbbing. Light and shadows dance around me. Pools of kerosene have caught fire. Fumes burn my eyes, stinging my nose.

Marcella is gone. Where her body lay is now dry earth and clotted blood.

I run. My flashlight is gone. I don't remember what happened to it. Have I turned around? Will I end up back in the chamber? No, I follow the upward slope. And then the tunnel ends, a wall of earth blocking my way.

Panic. Have to get out. I claw at the wall. Darkness. My mind squeezes itself shut. I become an animal. I grunt what words I can as I scramble at the dirt, trying to hold onto my sense of self. "My name is Mary Ellen Kramer. I was born on September 17, 1963, in Youngstown, Ohio." The soil seems to soak up my voice like water. "My mother's name was Anne." It's hard to breathe now. "I... studied... art history in... college... I... used to... go... swimming on... Thursdays... and... Saturdays..." My fingers are bleeding. "Met... Michael... at a... concert... Talking Heads.... My... sister... lives in... France.... My children... are... gone."

It's a just a layer of clumped dirt, trash and small rocks that's collapsed against the tunnel mouth. I push my way through, into the cool, open air. I fall onto the mud and cry like a newborn.

Now

I have used the white lightning perhaps a dozen times, seeking out hunter groups, listening to their tedious stories. I offer myself as a solution to their problems. They decide where and when. They use me as their secret weapon. Doesn't matter to me. In each group, I chose one or two. Pay a little visit. Point out what's really going on. Plant a few seeds. If they live long enough, see and do enough, they'll come to realize who their true enemies are. They'll tell others. *Don't trust the Messengers. Don't fight their battles. Don't be pawns. Find ways to work against them.* That's my message. That's my revenge.

Dear Mary Ellen,

I feel funny writing this, knowing you'll never see it, but the therapist thinks it will help me.

Having Ethan with us is a miracle. We'll always cherish him. Despite the hardships he's been through, he's full of life. Sometimes he tears around the house like a monster. He brings such joy and energy into our home.

The night they brought him, I'll never forget it. The agents from the government told us as much as they could. One of them, a tall woman, had such a strange look to her. Her eyes were so sad and kind. Just looking at them kept me calm. There are many things I don't understand and probably never will. It was frightening to hear. How you had to enter the witness-protection program. The cover stories about the divorce and the fire. But I suppose the details don't matter.

It's so unfair. After all you went through, all that time in hiding, for you and Michael and the girls to be taken from us by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. For seeing something criminals didn't want you to. If Ethan had been killed too, would we ever have found out the truth? I don't like to think about it.

I think of you every day. Ethan is growing into a strong and beautiful boy. I miss you.

Love,
Sarah

Each time I unleash the lightning, it's harder to control. The final time, it won't leave my body. It will surge inside me. Flames will tear through me like claws.

All that I used to be is gone. I realize that the fire I've been carrying inside me comes from the future. I see people and monsters locked in endless conflict, ignorant of the encroaching flames that chase at their heels. If they would just look up, they would see that the world is a plaything for titans. The Messengers and their dark opponents peer down from impossible heights, circle each other warily, putting words in the mouths of dying men. They shift their pawns back and forth with cold indifference.

Time stretches to my right, space to my left, and where they cross lies the world. Dark and light powers coil like serpents, ignorant of a third direction at right angles to them both. The last of me burns away and I strain to peer down that middle path. I don't see anything looking back at me. It's an unblinking eye of solitude. An infinite tangle of silence. Something undreamed of. It watches the clashing armies, patient, waiting for the stupid little game to finally end.

In my final moments, I reach for it.



CHAPTER 2: CRACKED AS THE DESERT GROUND

They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright.

— Psalms 20:8

My skin is dry. So is the inside of my nose. I've already had nosebleeds from the thin air here. I don't remember it being like this when I was young. Of course, I don't remember a lot of things from back then. Maybe it was always like this. Maybe the devil at my back has made it this way since.

How long has the devil been here in Collbran? Should that be 'Devil' with a capital 'D'? Is it *the* Devil? From the Tree of Knowledge? The angel kicked out of Heaven? God, I don't know. I don't know the difference between devils, or types of devils, I guess. I only know there is one and it's in this rock. Hiding. Sleeping, even. I don't know if it's trapped here or imprisoned or if it's just... what? Waiting, maybe? I think it's half in this world, half in another, wherever that may be. I'm afraid to find out what happens when it finally comes out. Right now, it's in that strange area where your eyes might not be open and yet you still see things, things that might be real or things that may never have *been* real.

I see those kind of things a lot.

Those things are what brought me here, back home. I can see the town from here, with my back pressed against the rock as the sun rises over the mesa. I can picture the halo around the sun, and I stare at it

for a few minutes to see if I get any visions. It was the visions that directed me home, step by step, to this place, to this rock. I have a duty. I know it's a labor of love, but I haven't figured out what the specifics are yet. It'll come to me. Until then, here I am.

I'll stare at the sun until a vision tells me what to do. I get a lot of my ideas that way. I'll see something in a light bulb, in a traffic light, something in the sun or the moon. It bores straight to my frontal lobe. Is that the right part? The frontal lobe? Maybe I mean the cerebral cortex. Or that little seahorse-shaped part, the hippocampus. I'm not a brain surgeon. Just a 20-year-old nobody-nothing girl. Just a stupid girl named Lorna who wants to help all the nightmares of the world. I took a few anatomy classes in community college, but dropped out pretty quick.

So, yeah, I see the truth in the light. Like Paul or Saul or whoever, on the road to Damascus. Instant enlightenment. Just add a flash of light. Some alien kidnapping victims say they get the same thing. A red laser pointed into their eyes, and suddenly they have the plans for an anti-gravity machine in their heads and don't know where it came from. Isn't that weird?

I guess they're messages from the Good Doctors. Some people I've met (and I've met a lot of people) call

them the Ministers or the Heralds or just 'The Voices,' but I get a hell of a lot more than just voices. And they're not messages. 'Messages' sound like something you get in a fortune cookie. I get full-blown movies. Morality plays chiseled into my mind. Full-on revelations.

I'm rambling. Let me get to the point. I've come to this rock, to the devil in *this rock*. Most importantly, I guess, to the town where I grew up until I was 13. I've come here to heal the whole place. I have very little food. A couple books, my Walkman, extra batteries and a pair of banged-up headphones. I'm ready to give it my all. I just don't know where my destination is, you know? What destiny has in store for me. Destination. Destiny. I like that. Those two words make sense together.

So, consider this my Last Will and Testament. Lorna Willborn is home and sleeping with the Devil, and here I'm probably going to die.

HOMEcoming

The town's called Collbran. I may have already said that. It's nestled here in the west end of Colorado, near Grand Junction, close to the Utah border. In the distance, you can see all the mesas covered in trees, but it's not like that here. Collbran is a sandy, dusty, almost red town, like we're in the desert. Jesus was in the desert. Jesus was tempted in the desert by the Devil. I'm not being tempted. I'm the one doing the tempting.

I grew up here, on the other side of town in a neighborhood called Red Rock North. My mother and father drank a little too much but they were nice and they loved me. I'm not one of those girls whose parents beat her or denied her stuff or anything. That's for everyone else. My cross to bear, the monkey on my back, was the rape. I remember it like it was something that happened to someone else. It doesn't really bother me now. Four teenage boys. I was 13. They were... what, 16, 18? Still in high school. Brad, Hicks, Scotty and Shaun. I don't remember their last names. My parents were out at some trade convention in Century, up near Boulder, where my dad was peddling hardware. I was out writing lame poetry at the playground and that's where they found me. They tore up my poetry and they raped me until the sun came up.

You'd think I'd hate them, but it just doesn't work like that. Maybe it should, but once I decided to forgive them, things became easier. Forgiveness, that's the skeleton key to getting through all the doors in life. Move past it, I say. Shut it out. Unlock each door by saying inside to yourself and outside to them: *I am sorry*. And then sister, you are healed! Everything heals that way. You know what 'Amen' means? It means *make it so*. Or *let it be done*. Something like that. An angel told

me. He whispered it in my ear when I was sleeping one night. And there you have it. That's the secret.

After the rape, I was in the hospital for a while. Then we moved to Century, sort of a half-shell of Colorado Springs. The city designers used the same street layout. (Everything is recycled these days.) So, there I was — a real angry kid until I got blessed with the understanding. It came fast. I had been sick all day. That happened sometimes after the rape. I would just get queasy, like maybe I had morning sickness. There were nightmares, too. Nothing I could remember. Just dreams that left me empty for the rest of the day, stumbling around feeling not quite right.

Then, later, I *became*. I was *chosen*. I didn't see it like that, at least not at first, but over time I knew I was blessed. Some of it was the visions. They weren't slow in pointing out what I had become. I could even hear people passing on the sidewalk or in the bank whispering about me, all together, talking about what I was fated to become. Some of them didn't like me and said I was going to fail. Others said I would become like white light, and they would follow me if I asked them. Even now, if I listen to the air, I can hear them talking about it. It sounds a little bit like crickets. Sometimes it sounds like words.

THE FIRST VISION

He came and went like a thief in the night. It was my son. Not that I ever had a son. I was pregnant once upon a time, from the rape. A 13-year-old, stupid girl with a bun in the oven. Born out of rape, built from the blood of rapists. My parents got me an abortion. If I would've had the kid, it would've been a boy, and I would've named him Mickey. Not after the mouse. After my grandfather, who was a doctor and a good man who treated diseases. So Mickey (the son, not the grandfather or the mouse) came to me just five minutes ago, near noon, and explained some rules of the game.

He smiled and said, "This is what it all comes to. We have a town full of people, many of whom are bad. Many of them think bad things about you, about the world, about everything. It's not their fault. Repeat that: *It's not their fault*. There's a devil in the rock. It's also not the devil's fault. The devil is a dream. A living nightmare caught between worlds. The nightmare of a sleeping giant with a big red eye up in the black sky. Together, we're going to forgive them all and wake them up from the bad dream. Prepare yourself, Lorna. This is going to be rough."

I smiled and said okay. He told me that if I forgave the town and helped the devil, I could heal the world. I hoped he was right.

Then he showed me a passage in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. That's one of the books I brought with me. He wanted me to read about good and evil. "For what is evil," the book said, "but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?" I agreed with my son. Then he walked away and was gone like *that*, like something in a heat-vapor. I called after him, but it was too late. He was nothing again. It's not the first time I've seen him.

SO FINE YOU BLOW MY MIND

Mickey was my first real vision. Every other time it was just a voice in my head, a thick, booming, dead sound that didn't so much talk to me as talk at me. "DEATH NEEDS LOVE." "BLOOD CARRIES SUFFERING." "THEY PASS IT ALONG." Other things like that. Some I remember, some I don't. But it was just scraps, just la-la-nothing kind of stuff that didn't amount to much more than riddles and hints. Then I found the witch.

I hate that word - 'witch.' Rhymes with 'bitch.' Totally negative toward women. Why did I use it? It wasn't even a woman. It was a man. I'd say 'warlock,' but that sounds ludicrous, like he was some Oz weirdo with a purple robe and a Snidley Whiplash mustache. Let's just say I found him on a fire escape in Century, and there was no purple robe — just a flannel sweatshirt and a pair of knee-hole sweatpants with the drawstring missing. The Good Doctors had directed me to him, leaving me messages all over town to get me there. When I got to him my sight turned on and I could see how strange he looked, like an HIV lesion or a really bad bruise.

He was holding himself and shivering (even though it was May and a warm, rainy evening). He turned toward me with these big, pretty eyes and said, "I think I got them all killed." Then something dropped out of his hand (a pill bottle, I found out later), and he fell from the fire escape. His head cracked on the pavement and his neck broke. His head was angled funny and his body shook.

Everything stopped, or slowed down, anyway. Even the raindrops slowed. Then Mickey showed up. He jumped down from the fire escape and dropped to a crouch in total silence. He eased up next to me and put his arm through mine like he was taking me to prom. He just breathed out a sad sigh and said, "Hey, Mom."

I about died. Here was my son. And I knew he was my son. There wasn't any confusion or question. It was Mickey! He looked about 13, about as old as I was when he was conceived, even though that didn't make sense. (Twenty minus 13 is seven, so why wasn't he seven years old? Later, in other visions, he would be.) Still, I

didn't give a damn. I loved him and the way he was next to me — warm and solid and definitely *real*. I could tell he loved me back. As if reading my mind, he said:

"Only love would let me cross time and space and death and life to see you, isn't that right?" Then he smiled. "You've been on the right track lately. There are people upstairs watching you, and you're getting an 'A' for Effort — so far." He patted my shoulder.

"I love you," I said.

"You have to love everyone, that's the thing. Don't just love me. Love the whole place. And what's love? Love is the capacity to forgive, not to forget. Never to forget. Forgiveness is the gateway to your power, and you have so much power in you, Mom."

I found that to be wonderful. Forgiveness is power. A totally abstract idea, but I went to it like a bee to honey. Before then, I just felt bad for them all. Everyone, myself, whoever. I just felt bad and I wanted them to feel better, so I tried to help. But forgiveness and power.... I nodded, tears welled up in my eyes and I asked Mickey where I should start.

He gestured toward the body with his thumb. "Him, probably. There's a core of that forgiveness inside you. Just go over there and give him a big wet one, and you'll feel it go from you to him. I'm going to leave you for a bit, but I'll be back. I'll bring friends. They'll tell you other things. If everything goes according to plan, well... let's just say we'll see. The eyes are watching. I love you, Mom. See you someday in the Kingdom of All Good Things."

I mouthed the word "Okay," but he was already gone and the world resumed. I saw a fleeting glimpse of my aborted son's face in a murky oil-slick puddle, and then the only thing I was concerned about was the warlock. I followed Mickey's instructions without hesitation — how could my son be wrong? He wasn't. The gift he gave me was a powerful one. I pressed my lips to the man's, and the stuff flowed from me to him. It was *love*. It was forgiveness. White-golden. The man jerked and woke up. He was alive, healthy. Ready to resume whatever great destiny was his to live. His head was on straight. No broken neck, no nothing. He seemed confused and couldn't speak right away.

It was a stupid thing to do, but I was so overwhelmed that I unbuckled his pants and made love to him right there. I straddled him and let our love mingle. He seemed shocked, but I had a lot of love to give. What can I say? Then I kissed him on the forehead and told him that whatever it was, it wasn't his fault. Whoever had died would forgive him, and they would

wait for him in the Kingdom of All Good Things if he would be a good man and wait patiently. Then I left.

DETERMINATION

Handcuffs. They're the secret, I decide. I've been sitting here, wondering about my purpose, and thinking about when I did it with the warlock. Sometimes the body doesn't do what the head wants, right? I just *know* my body will betray me and somewhere along the line I'll want to run away and get water and food and whatever else, but that's not my reason for being here. I have to remain steady. So I handcuff my legs together at the ankles. Then I take the key and throw it away. It bounces off of a few small red rocks and is gone. For a second, I wonder why I even brought handcuffs to begin with. Where'd I get them? Who cares? They're here and I need them.

I'm going to do this. I'm something special. Something that hasn't been seen in a long time. Jesus might have been like what I am. Muhammad, too. And that Prophet. Buddha. Zoroaster. All good people. Good folks who knew that to heal was to be healed. Who knew that to get into the Kingdom of All Good Things, we have to be good ourselves.

In the desert, pointing at the rock at my back, are two angels. Cherubs, each one like an old, cracked porcelain doll, resting their chins on sword hilts. The swords are on fire. The angels are whispering to each other about the gates to the Garden of Eden. They're telling secrets, but I know that I'm not ready to hear them. As the days go on, I'll be ready. I'll be let in on their secrets.

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

The night was hard and cold, just like everything else out here. I remember that from when I was young. I want to talk a little bit about the devil and the rock. The rock is very big — 10 times taller than me, maybe. A big, red, craggy thing that looks like a finger pointing to God. The rust color reminds me of dried blood. I've seen that too many times. But in blood is forgiveness (just read the Bible), so I'm okay with that. Still, there's been a lot of blood in my life. It started when I was 13. After the playground, there was a lot of dried blood on my thighs. My lips and my dress, too. Wait, I was talking about the rock and the devil, and here I am rambling again.

The devil is in the rock, like I've said. I don't know how it got there. It's not so much a physical devil, I think, as a... spiritual one? Is that the right word? Who knows? The point is, if I were to crack the rock in half with some holy power (a power I don't have, not yet anyway), you wouldn't see any devil. It would be there,

only contained in each little chip of stone, but not *really* there. Not as regular people would understand it.

I haven't gotten a total picture of the devil yet. Actually, no picture at all other than what my mind has made up. I just hear her sleeping. Did I say *her*? That's strange, until now I had no idea the devil was a she, but it makes a lot of sense. I can relate to women a lot better than men most of the time. That's why I was a rape-crisis counselor in Century. I helped women to forgive their monsters, sometimes face-to-face. Meeting their monsters let them release their pain. I even encouraged them not to press charges. Punishing their attackers was just another way to pass along the pain. Excuse me for saying, but passing the buck like that is bullshit. A bad idea if ever there was one.

What I'm trying to say is, if this devil is truly a woman, then we'll get along just fine. I'll help her leave this place. I'll help the nightmare end for the sleeping giant.

THE SECOND VISION

I was hungry and thirsty, so I wolfed down the bag of pistachios I'd brought. The red ground beside me littered with red shells reminded of blood. Blood of the lamb. Blood of forgiveness. Blood of the damned. It actually made a pool of real blood there all of a sudden, and then it talked to me. That sounds weird, but not as much as you might think. No worse than a burning bush talking.

There wasn't any mouth, but I pictured one anyway because it made more sense. "God gave a gift to the Church," the blood said. "The gift of exorcism. But they don't use it anymore. Not like they should. That's why you're here. There are devils aplenty in the world, and for every devil there's one exorcist. *This* devil is very big and very strong, but if you're worthy and you know your *own* blood, you'll persevere. *You* are the exorcist. Now, please turn in your Bible to Matthew, 10:1."

I hurried to get out the Bible I'd brought with me. It took me a minute, but I found the passage. "Having summoned his 12 disciples, he gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every kind of disease and infirmity." I had no comment other than that sounded perfect. 'Unclean spirits'? Even thinking the words gave me an automatic image of the town, and all its people stumbling around with poison tubes stuck to their hearts. I thanked the talking blood for preaching to me about my importance. It's wonderful to be needed.

FIRE AND FORGIVENESS

Sometimes I taught the monsters to forgive themselves. A lot of the time it was teaching others to forgive the monsters, to show them that creatures don't always



know what they're doing. Do you really think monsters asked to be the way they are? They were raped. The choice to be what they are wasn't a choice at all. It's a penetrative act, becoming a monster. A violation of your very human nature. Sometimes I had to show even the monsters that.

There was one, a poor blood-drinker named Stewart. He was a sweet boy. (Funny, he was older than me in both human age *and* vampire age, and I call him 'boy.') He said his mother Annalise went down to Rio de Janeiro to die. Actually, he said, a big monster woke up in the jungle and called many of her children home, and Annalise was one of them. Or, she was one of its grandchildren. A lot of people went and never returned. He said his mother made deals with demons. He saw it all, but never said anything. I believed him. Why would he lie to me? His mother was a real monster, I hear. I guess she was hated by some, but I think she was controlled by the big monster. Annalise's hunger wasn't her own. Neither was Stewart's. Apparently it was passed down from monster to son, from son to daughter, like a cruel favor.

I taught Stewart to refuse the favor. I told him that he was raped by a rapist, and his own rapist (his mother) was herself a rape victim. That's how it goes. You violate me, then I go on to violate someone else. In revenge, but that's the wrong idea and I realized it. I got to be the mouthpiece for this idea that people have trouble understanding. Left unchecked, Stewart would have probably molested someone else just as he'd been, and so I told him that. It took a while. Weeks of talking, rooting him to the spot and drilling him with the same questions, over and over. I asked him to look for his own humanity. I knew it was in there, sleeping like the devil in the rock. It was time to wake it up! Shake it from its slumber and show it to the world.

It worked. He felt better. We sat up and watched the sunrise. He was spent, empty, tired. He cried blood and it dripped down his cheek. It reminded me of rusty water stains on old pipes. He smiled, and then he burned up in my arms with the first light of the sun. I was burned, too, by his flesh. I still have the scars on my inner arms. The burns are reminders of how well my teaching works. I saw the sun, the sun that truly gave him the forgiveness, and I was allowed to see my second *real* vision. I don't remember it now, it's all a bit cloudy, but I saw just a flicker of The End. Dark figures rising up out of the earth and oceans. Puppet strings. Teeth and claws. A black lion. Eyes opening on Orion's Belt. Pyramids blowing away into dust that stung my eyes. A red eye blinking. A world of blood.

RAPIST

It was almost nighttime and my eyes were closed, but through my lids I saw red, then blue, then red, then blue. I opened them to see a cop car sitting about a hundred feet away. A cop got out and came up to me with a confused look on his face. It only took me a second to recognize him — one of my four rapists. Scotty Kessler. The joker. The running back. The teenage boy who worked at his Daddy's John Deere dealership. The 16-year-old who pressed his skinny body against mine as someone's gym sock was shoved past my tongue. He didn't recognize me.

It wasn't really dark yet, but he flashed his flashlight at me. I half-expected to get a vision in it, but not this time. Then he flashed it at the handcuffs around my ankles. The look on his face was priceless, like they say in those credit-card commercials.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I don't know. Waiting." He looked at me like I was some crazy girl. He still didn't recognize me. I mean, I've put on some pounds since then. I actually have boobs now. But his face was so close to mine that night, I figure he'd know me right away.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said. I asked him why? "This is BLM land."

"I don't know what that is," I told him. He sighed. "Bureau of Land Management. They own this. It's government property. You can't—" But he didn't finish his sentence, and for a minute, I thought he was going to figure out who I really was. No such luck.

So I asked him, "I can't what?"

"I dunno," he said. He looked confused. "What are you doing out here?"

I considered lying, but I've only got a short time left here, I figured. Lies don't go over well in the Kingdom of All Good Things, I expect. Don't they say that the truth will set you free? I'm all about freedom. Freedom is what's on the other side of the door when you understand forgiveness. So I told him. I explained that I'm waiting here until I'm maxed out, until I have the Power of Greyskull or whatever, until I can save them all by freeing them. He sagged like a deflated balloon and hung his head in disappointment. He probably expected a protester or some girl pulling a stupid sorority prank.

"Great, a nut," he said aloud to no one but himself, shaking his head. "Now I'm going to have to take you in."

I couldn't let that happen. And it didn't look like Scotty Kessler was going to get any revelations on his

own time (not to my convenience, anyway), so I laid it all out on the table.

"You raped me when I was 13," I said. He rolled his eyes like I was talking nonsense. But then, a second later, he realized just how wrong he was, and it was a fantastic, humbling moment. Panic. Fear. I could almost hear his stomach turn.

"Lorna." That's what he said. My name. He whispered it, like you might if you were saying the secret name of God. Here I am, I thought, a ghost from the past rattling her bloody chains against the desert ground.

I told him he was right, that it was me, Lorna. That he and three other boys raped me on the playground. That they had me on the slide and on the tire-swing and in the sandbox. I told him that the doctors had to pull sand out of burns on my back. He staggered back and made a sound like a wounded animal. I felt very bad. I didn't want to rub his nose in it. I just wanted him to remember. So I told him — and this was the bomb that blew up Hiroshima — that I forgave him.

"I don't know what made you do it," I said. Maybe the other three made you. Maybe you played with each other in the locker room that day and you did what you did to me so you wouldn't feel gay. Or maybe your father dressed you up like a daughter out on the John Deere and did things to you that you don't even remember. It's okay. We're all just part of a great chain of violation. But I'm free now, so it's okay. Forgive yourself and then... let your pain out." Like an electric current, I thought.

He didn't deal well, but I guess that's to be expected. I mean, this idea of forgiveness isn't just rush-hour traffic. It's serious business. The business of angels and prophets. It's the light that will strike you blind. He started to back up and dropped his flashlight. Before he ran back to his car, I told him that he had to leave me here to finish my work. That I'd really appreciate being left alone to make everything better. He slammed the door, the red and blue lights went out, and his tires spat dust and rocks as he tore back to town.

UNCLEAN SPIRITS

This town has always been filled with strange people. It was when I was young, and I can smell on the wind that it's the same way now. The people were bad. They didn't mean to be, but they were. Like my rapists. Four boys who didn't know what they were doing. Consequences didn't apply. They're ignorant and stupid and are just passing down the thorny crown that was put on their heads by someone else.

The rapists weren't the only screw-ups. There were other people, too. Problem people. I had an aunt in

town. Dabney. What a name — Dabney. She had this husband, not my natural uncle. (I never met him). This was someone she married when I was maybe nine or 10. He was a Green Beret or something in Vietnam. A wild-eyed guy, real happy. He told stories about the war, not like it was *Full Metal Jacket* but like it was something out of a Schwarzenegger movie. His stories were exciting memories, not child-killing nightmares. My aunt loved him, I thought, but one day she decided to attack him with a lamp while he was sleeping. Then she divorced him and tried to get him kicked out of the army by telling them he was gay. What makes a person do that sort of thing to somebody they love?

Then there was a guy down at the hardware store. He came in every day and talked to my dad like they were buddies. Talked fishing lures and bullet grains, and then one day he went into the cafeteria of the retirement home and started hacking at old people with a knife. Just like that. His father was in there. An old man, 83 or something like that. He was the only one who was spared. I don't know why.

That's Collbran, though. A history of domestic violence and people who just can't take it anymore. The town never hit boiling point, but always hovered just below it, with a fever the people couldn't break. A lot of it was passed down in the grand circle of crap. People hurting people because they were hurt, blah blah blah. But somewhere along the way, I now know, a devil came along and entered the rock. I don't know if she was there all along or if the way people treated each other *called* her here. It's a sickness.

But just like them, it's not her fault. There's no blame. She's the product of a deranged cosmic mind. Not God. Someone else. I don't know who. Either way, her poison wasn't taken, it was *injected*. Like I said, this monster stuff is a penetrative act. Everybody's innocent. They just need to remember that by being shown the way. I'm the flashlight, like the one Scotty dropped. I cut through the shadows and I show the way.

I got really hungry. There was some food left: a Snickers bar and a bag of Craisins (those cranberry-raisins). I ate the Craisins and I could taste a hint of salvation.

PICKING SCABS

It got hot at noon. My forehead felt hotter than the ground. I started to wonder, why did I ever come back here? Why would I come back to a place like Collbran? Purpose, I told myself.

See, being what we are, we see small purposes. Teeny-weeny goals that we take care of with our stupid

little baby steps. That was me. Wandering around Century and other local towns, healing and forgiving, one by one. The monsters needed my words, and I blessed them as best I could.

I never once thought back to the place I came from. Actually, I mostly blocked it out of my head. Why go back and think of it? Why pick at the scab? But as I did more and more work, I came to realize that sometimes we have to pick the scab to let the infection air. It needs to be cleaned like that sometimes. And here, in my past, was one giant scab, crusted and oozing. It was ripe for some serious picking. After all, hadn't I decided that we have to confront all the pain that's been handed to us? Collbran was the one place where pain had been handed to me in spades. And maybe I hadn't confronted it well enough — or at all.

So, I came back. I wandered around town for a few days. Stayed down at the Four Leaf Clover, which is this moldy old motel that had seen more bad days than good. The town wasn't much different from when I'd last been there seven years ago. It still looked like it was poised on the brink of one big sigh, ready to exhale its last sick breath before dying. Everyone had the same haunted look. Stepping on the sidewalk cracks, looking like they'd just snapped their mothers' backs.

Then the Good Doctors showed me the way. They showed me the invisible sucking tubes that connected everyone. Pulling at them, draining their goodness and feeding on the holes in their souls. Where did the tubes go? I had to find out, and I followed the messages like it was the trail of proverbial bread crumbs. What did I find? I found a rock with a devil in it.

And now here I am. Waiting to be shown the way. There's a town full of broken people, a town that birthed me and gave me life and raped me of everything I had. But that was a gift, really. And now I'm here to return the gift. I'm here with deliverance.

THE THIRD VISION

Looks like all the Holy Ones are talking to me now. Soon everybody will have given me their two cents, and I'll be holding all the cards.

Three crows told me the truth. They were visions, and yet they weren't. More to the point, the crows were real. I sensed that much. They were big, black, oily birds shifting from foot to foot on a piece of the devil rock. Their voices were the visions.

Let me clarify a point, here. By visions, I don't mean that they weren't true, or were just dumb hallucinations pulled out of thin air or something. Visions are more true than what we see most of the time.



They're secret messages sent from somewhere, know what I mean? Transmissions from beings — like God — who are nothing but pure truth, forgiveness and understanding. We're talking straight from the horse's mouth here. Or in this case, the crow's beak.

The crows told me that they had a message from Crow, like with a capital 'C' or something. They said that Crow was an old god pushed away by white hands, but that he was still busy up in the clouds and old trees. I guess Crow had a good time with life, but now The End was coming and having a good time was getting harder and harder.

"It's important to save the world," one of the crows told me, and a second crow picked up the sentence: "Because if the world goes to hell in a hand basket, no one will be able to laugh anymore."

The third crow spoke: "The world is going to hell, don't misunderstand. But right now the valve is turned all the way and the floodgates are wide open. Hell is pouring out at a thousand gallons per second, and it's drowning the world in its own pain. But your hands are on the valve. Start turning. Rightie-tightie, leftie-loosie. Make it tighter. Start closing the floodgates."

"You'll never close it all the way," the first crow said.

"No. But even closing it half-way," the second said, "that's a feat in itself, don't you think?"

"Pain happens," number three announced matter-of-factly. "It's an extant force. Can't get rid of it wholesale without dying, but you can reduce it to its bare minimum. That's our plan. That's what you have to help us do."

"Okay," I agreed. I was the hand that turns the valve. The End was coming. I asked if we couldn't just stop it, though. Wouldn't that be better? The crows all shook their heads.

"It's like a car crash," they said in one voice. "You can't avoid it, but you can steer the car to stop it from killing everyone. There will be pain. There will be grinding metal. But handle it right, and we might make it through with all our fingers and toes."

Then the crows took off and left me with my stomach rumbling. The Craisins were long gone. So was the Snickers, and I don't even remember eating it. I took a heaping gulp of water to help soothe my stomach, and I let the morning come and go.

MARKINGS

Signs. There are signs everywhere.

I wanted some exercise today. It was late afternoon and I started crawling around on my hands and feet. I

scuttled around the rock, my hands and knees stinging as I crawled around like an animal. On the far side of the rock, pretty much opposite of where I've been sitting, I saw a sign. It was carved into the rock, dug into the rusty stone with some tool or something. It was a spiral. Crooked and uneven, but a spiral. I felt it, ran my fingers along it. I was probably imagining it, but it felt hot, like a child running a fever. It gave me an idea.

I held my breath, hardened myself up for the pain and bit my thumb. Hard enough to take a hunk of skin off. Blood started dripping into the dust, and I drew symbols next to the spiral. First a cross (or a crucifix — I know there's a difference but forget what it is). Then a Star of David. Then a swastika — and not because of any Nazi thing. I hear Hitler just took the symbol from the Native Americans and used it for his own sick reasons. It's actually a powerful type of cross, I think, something primal and pagan that Hitler probably didn't even understand. I wonder what pain happened to him that he had to pass it along to millions of others. It had to be pretty bad, whatever it was.

So, cross, star and swastika. Then I put one of our symbols there, a part of our ancient language. A sign that seemed to mean 'tormented,' I think, above all the others. That's what this is, this rock, this devil. This whole *world*. Tormented. Tortured. Taunted. And in the process, just because I like 'T' words right now, it's tainted, too. Tainted by its own torment. Makes perfect sense to me.

When I was done, I crawled back to where I had been sitting, where my knapsack was, and sucked my thumb. *The blood tasted good. At some point, I passed out.*

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

People are talking about me. About *it*. About what's going to happen, you know? There's a palpable sense about the whole thing, a buzzing hum like the wings of a bee. That's what it sounds like. Or maybe like a million ants whispering. *I look across the flat, cracked desert, past the rocks and scrub, and I see the town. And in the town are people. And right now, they're talking.*

I think maybe she told them. The devil. I can't promise anything, but that's way I figure it. I don't know if she talks directly into their heads or slips them notes. Maybe she talks to them like the Good Doctors talk to my kind. BIG BOOMING WORDS. MES-SAGES. INFORMATION. CRYPTIC JUNK AND STUFF. Could be.

The point is, they're talking about me. They know it's coming to a head. I just have this fear that they've already skipped ahead to the end of the story and torn

out the last page just to spite me. How mean would that be? Then what am I left with? Uncertainty. I don't want to be uncertain. I don't know how this will end. I don't even entirely know why I'm here, only that I have to heal everybody, myself, the devil and her home.

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

Earlier, I thought a little about Scotty Kessler. What he must've been feeling after seeing me again after all this time. Then, like I had maybe summoned him out of nothing, I saw him driving by a ways away. His cop car coughed up a cloud of red dust as he drove by. I could see him looking at me. He felt bad, I could tell. The guilt came off him like the dust from his car. I couldn't help but feel awful. I hope I see him again. Maybe that's why he's a policeman now, trying to make up for the breaches in his own morality. That would be fair.

He was always such a nice boy. Sports star. Eagle scout. *Really good on the rifle team. Didn't date much.* Was sort of awkward in that way. Having the wrong friends is probably the worst people could say about him. And yet he was capable of raping someone. Me. Barely a teenage girl who hadn't even bled for the first time. I wonder what made him do that to me. What happened to him in his life before then that left him so barren inside? It had to be pretty bad.

I watched him drive by, and he headed back to town. Maybe he was driving around, checking on me, seeing if I was okay. That made me feel good — that he'd care for me like that. I know now that when I think of the rape, it doesn't hurt anymore. I hope he'll end up the same way before this is all over.

RAPIST, AGAIN

Scotty drove back out again to see me. I saw the car coming, looking like a Hot Wheels on the horizon.

He got out and stood there. He wasn't looking at me, he was looking at my outline. His eyes moved around me, but they never fell on me. The guilt was practically crawling out of him like a flood of spiders, and my heart hurt for him.

"Do I have to leave?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "No. I'm just checking on you."

"You feel bad for me, out here alone. You think I'm doing this to prove something to you. *Or about you. But I'm not.* You're not even the reason I'm here. The whole town's sick. I can see it now. The Good Doctors want me to operate, so I'm going to."

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Then he fished in his pocket for something and tossed

it to me. Two packets bounced against my thigh. Sunflower seeds in one. Trail mix in the other.

"Here," he said. "Eat up. I have to go. Don't get any fool ideas in your head about anything. You're just a crazy girl out here, making things up."

Then he headed back to the car, which he never even turned off, and drove back toward town. There was hope for him yet, I thought, and I tore open the trail mix with my teeth and began devouring it.

STATIC

I put on my Walkman headphones, turned it on, and heard some of that ugly girlie-pop music that's out right now. Let's be honest, these girls tease and men don't like to be teased, and this music teases them. It gives them ideas about what girls want, but girls don't really want that. Maybe it's because of men that bubblegum girl-pop is all over the place. Someone needs to stop it so we can get on with the plan of healing each other. My parents always said I was a dreamer.

Anyway, I hate that kind of music, but it's sort of sweet in its own way, I guess. While I think the music does more damage to a teenage girl than anyone wants to admit, I left it on.

But then it went to static, and then a message came through. It sounded like that backward voice on one of those Beatles albums, where it supposedly says, "I Buried Paul." (Or was it Ringo? No, that doesn't sound right.) This one said I should open *The Prophet* again. I didn't know precisely what I was looking for, but I knew it when I found it. Dizzy, I began reading the section on pain. This is what it said: "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding." I didn't understand, so I kept reading.

"Much of your pain is self-chosen. It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self," Gibran wrote and I read. "Therefore trust the physician, and drink his remedy in silence and tranquillity."

The words washed over me like healing waters. Like salt in a wound. I know that phrase means that you're rubbing salt in a wound to make it hurt more, but salt heals. Salt is good. It sucks up the poisons, leeches out the infection in some sort of osmosis.

Once I finished reading, night came fast and I slept.

WET DREAMS

I dreamt of the past again. Sometimes the past does that. It just sneaks up on you when your back is turned and bites you on the ass to get your attention. And dreams, they aren't like visions. They're not something handed to you from On High. They're love letters from

your own head, pointing out things about your relationship with the world that maybe you missed — or were too afraid to see. This dream was no different, just dumping out the mental garbage and letting me rifle through the trash to see what gems were hiding there.

When I was in Century, I hooked up with this group of other people like me. We worked together for about six months. They had just gotten over a pretty rough period when a lot of bad stuff went down in the city. I missed it all because I hadn't had my eyes opened yet. For a while, mostly when I was helping Stewart, there was a parade of beast-men and blood-drinkers and violence. They had mostly made it through. There was a woman who wanted to fight the creatures off at every turn. There was this big boxer guy, sweet and dumb and wonderful, who just wanted to end all the violence. And there was another one I never met. He stayed behind the scenes a lot. Talked on the phone and in chat rooms, and that's all I ever knew of him. They got me logged on to that Internet site. My name was Counselor or something. I didn't even pick it out, they did. We worked together for awhile.

But I did deal with one girl all by myself. They say she was a ghost, but now I don't even know if ghosts exist. Maybe they're something else entirely, you know? Whatever she was, she was lost and alone and wandering the highways around Century, so empty and cold. I wanted to help her. Badly. And I did. She and I spent a lot of nights walking. We'd talk and ask each other questions. We'd talk about all the things she missed from being alive. I didn't tell the others. I couldn't. She was mine to save, not theirs. They didn't get it, anyway.

But one night I asked her a question: "What were your parents like?" She froze, stiff as a board. Her lips barely moved, and she said mouse-quiet, "*Now you've gone and made him mad.*" I said, "Him? Who?" And then there was a swarm of stinging flies coming out of the darkness. She yelled and pushed me with strength I didn't even know she had. I must've been thrown back 15 feet and hit my head. I was pretty much done. The last thing I remember before passing out is that I wondered who 'he' was, who was controlling her. Someone gave her that anger, and I told myself I'd find out who he was, no matter what.

But I never got the chance.

The others found out what happened. Maybe I told them when I was half-conscious, or maybe a vision came to them like they were coming to me. They found her and used the week that I was in the hospital to find all the things left in the world that she loved. And they took them and set them on fire. That poor girl went away,

melting or fading or whatever, and that was that. I never helped her. Never healed her. Never saw her again.

All the while, I'd been communicating on the web with someone who called himself Bookworm. Nice, friendly, just a good soul. I told him what happened. I poured my heart out over email and told him about my failure. He made me feel better by saying it was okay, that I had to forgive myself and that this whole thing we did was a process of baby steps, that we couldn't expect miracles. I thanked him and we never wrote again, but I always held a place for him in my heart. As for the others, I left them and never saw them again. I hear they're dead now. It's a shame.

Bookworm, though — he was right and he was wrong at the same time. He was right about forgiveness. I had to forgive myself. Otherwise, I would have eaten myself up until there was nothing left, you know? But he was wrong about something. We *can* expect miracles. That's what I expect here. Back against the rock, devil hiding inside, I expect a God's honest miracle. And I'm going to be the conduit, I guess you'd say. Or at least, I'm hoping to be. I can't fail. There's no room for failure. If I turn away from the light and I stop staring into the sun, it's over, *finito*, and I'll lose my chance to do my final act of good. And then what? I'll be left alive, a burned-out husk, stupid and empty and foolish and forgiving myself until I'm blue in the face. I'm feeling doubt. Terrible doubt. I've gone too far. This has all gone too far.

SCARS

I looked up at the stars before I went to sleep and imagined lines connecting all of them. One big constellation. But the lines were cuts — deep white slashes — and ended up being puffy and crooked, like scars.

I had scars from when that sad girl pushed me. One on the back of my head that turned my hair white. Just a patch of it about as big as a dime. Then there was the burn on my back from when I was raped. You can still feel bits of sand back there if you're careful with your fingers. Anyway, the scars are still there between my shoulder blades. Like a patch of rough ground.

Then there are the burns on my forearms from Stewart. They look different from the marks on my back. They're red and blotchy, like a rash, but they're not rashes. They're reminders.

After I was raped, I became a "cutter." I liked making scars. It wasn't a cry for help. That's what the doctors said, but I didn't buy it. I just liked marking myself. That's all. I stopped about a year before I became what I am today. But then, not too long ago

(not long after I started seeing Mickey), I started cutting again. When I did it as a girl, I kept the cuts in places people couldn't see. High on my thigh, up at the top of my biceps. But now? Now I like people to see. Scars are marks of a journey. Sign posts. I like to give everyone a clue as to where I'm going. It helps prepare them. It helps prepare us all.

TALKS WITH WOLVES

I kept sleeping and waking, sleeping and waking. Sometime before dawn my stomach woke me up and it felt like a black hole. I sat up and then I saw them — three wolves coming out of the shadows. One, sort of a mottled-gray thing with one eye and a limp, had an earring. I thought that was weird. An earring on a wolf. I think it was a she, though I have nothing to base that on. The other two hung back, one black and one white, and sniffed at the air. Then I heard a foot scuff on a rock, and a warning flag went up.

There was someone else, standing behind them. I could see him when I urged myself to. He was trying to conceal himself from me but it wasn't going to happen. I pointed at him and said, "I see you there." I knew these weren't just wolves. They showed up strange and blurry, so I figured them to be the beast-men I've heard about. Or man-wolves. I don't know which is right.

"You're messing with something you don't understand," the hiding figure said. "There's a spirit in that rock, a venomous thing that will eat your soul if you sit there long enough. I don't know what your game is, but we're the watchers here. You're trespassing on our dirt."

I explained that I'd be fine, thanks, no need to worry about me.

"Don't you get it, girl? This place is *corrupt*. What sleeps at your back is a fiend like you don't even comprehend. Others like it are already loose. They're out there, pulling the curtain closed on all this, and you don't give a rat's ass. One got free not quite a year ago. It caused terrible pain. You're in the way of this one. It'll take you and use you. It's been using the town over there for years. So, I suggest again that you get those things off your legs and leave. Got me?"

I let that all settle in, and then, heart racing, I responded, "First, I don't much care, and I was serious when I said I'd be fine. Second, the thing behind me isn't an *it*, it's a *she*, and she's just hurting on the inside and needs some attention. Finally," I said, "there's nothing you can do to make me leave. The best you can do is head back to wherever you came from. You're all very angry. I sense that. You need to give yourself time to put out that fire or you're all going to burn up."

The hiding man shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, and the three wolves looked at him as if expecting an answer.

His answer was: "Be that way. Kill the girl."

I wasn't going to let that happen. I didn't even mean to do what I did, but it made a lot of sense and saved my tail, so I'm glad I did it. When the wolves come close, I lit up like the star on a Christmas tree, white and fierce, the Star of David, the North Star, the Star of Bethlehem, the star that sailors navigated by. I showed the wolves and the man that I could tear off my skin and reveal the pure holiness inside me, that all the forgiveness had a body and a name and it was Lorna. I'd never done that trick before, but it was a good one and the three wolves went darting off, howling. The man just disappeared.

I hoped later that they would get together to discuss what had happened, so they could understand that they have some serious problems to attend to. Part of me was afraid and sad that I didn't help them right then and there, but another part of me knew that what I'm doing here is bigger than those animals. Once I'm done with my plan here, others will follow my example.

IDENTITY

I've been having sex dreams. Isn't that strange? I don't know how many now. I wake up, I fall back asleep, and another dream starts. I've really only been half-asleep, though, so it feels like I'm really having sex, not just dreaming it. Maybe I am. These days, anything is possible, and I'm even thinking that maybe I can create reality with my mind if I think hard enough.

You know, by the time I was 15 I'd slept with 11 guys. Almost 12, but he was drunk and couldn't get it up. Some people said I was trying to get back at men, that I just wanted to rape them back. I don't buy that. I did always like being on top, though. Don't they call that the 'power position?' The woman in control? All that nonsense? Whatever. By the time I was 19, the list was pretty long. I tried to count them all earlier, and couldn't even remember their names. Amazing that I never got pregnant. Maybe the rape and the abortion ruined my womb. I think by the time all this ends, I'll have given birth to something, but it won't necessarily come out from *down there*. Those boys may have broken my uterus. Nothing I can do about it now, is there?

You'd think I hate men, but I don't. I'm actually a little sad for them, because I think their souls get damaged quicker than ours. They're always so violent and angry. The virus of suffering that they pass along to one another is bigger and stronger than the one we women

catch. They're more cruel. We're all part of the tragedy. I have to heal everybody. I have to stop the tragedy.

THE FOURTH VISION

I've been passing in and out of consciousness. It's amazing how bad it feels not to eat and drink. I've been worried all day that this is all an illusion and that I'm not real. That I'm making a mistake.

Toward the end of the day, I gained some kind of strength, though, some inner power that I hope I keep finding. Maybe it was from finishing my last few mouthfuls of water. When I was done drinking, an angel came. There was little fanfare, which surprised me. He didn't fly up or blow a trumpet or anything. He just walked up with his wings tucked behind his back and wiped my forehead with a damp cloth. I asked him if he was finally ready to tell me the secrets, and he answered: "Look into my mouth and see what the devil once called *home*."

I looked. His mouth was a void. No tongue, no teeth. Only darkness, with a flickering image buried in the back of his throat. What I saw was Hell. I have no doubt.

There was blood and fire. There were... machines. Churning, and spitting sparks and red lightning. Men were crushed in the machines while other men turned cranks and pulled levers. Beasts that looked like insects and larva and spiders and wolves prowled crooked catwalks, dripping saliva and poison and black ooze. In the distance, I saw violence and rape. My mind whirled around furious and dizzy. I entered a spiraling roadway and passed through a bunch of gateways, each one turning my stomach. I felt imprisoned, trapped, like there was something holding me there. I could feel that the place itself was alive, the heart of some great monster, but even it was trapped by some other unyielding power. There were a lot of forces at work.

Hell, I realized, wasn't a place of punishment. Not directly, anyway. It was a place that was *being* punished. A place of violation built on the foundation of its own rape. It made so much sense, and then suddenly I was jerked out of the angel's mouth and spit back against the rock, my ankles still shackled together. I had terrible cottonmouth and I couldn't stop shaking.

The angel said one last thing before leaving: "If ye remain firm and act rightly, even if the enemy should rush here on you in hot haste, the Creator would help you with five thousand angels, making a terrific onslaught."

I blinked. The angel said quietly, smiling, "That's from the Koran. And it's true, to boot."

Then he was gone. I looked down and found the Koran sitting in the dust. Did I even bring it? I don't remember. I'm having problems remembering. Any-

way, it was open to that passage. The page was smeared with bloody fingerprints. I guess I had reopened the cut on my thumb. That's fine. I don't mind bleeding.

THE CHOSEN

If I had more time around here (but I don't think I do), I would lead all of my kind to a sort of Promised Land. I think I could heal them all. Whoever made people put some flaws in our blueprints. I'd love to show everyone our flaws, to point to them and say, "Look! Look at how poisoned we've become by our own anger!" Then I could show them that I'm going to get my halo soon, and they would all listen to me. Everyone listens to angels.

"Shed your skin," I'd say to them. "Get rid of it. Tear it all off and find the peace underneath. There's a deep well of mercy inside us, and if we have to dig deep to find it, then that's the way it has to be. It's the only way to break us out of the cycle." Others like me, they just want to hurt the monsters. Or save themselves. They don't see it's all about enlightenment and understanding. I could lead the way. I could.

Now I'm feeling bad that I didn't choose that road. I think I could have. At one point, I remember whispers telling me that I could be their guide. The power I would've had over them all would've been enough to straighten them out. But I chose another way and now I'm here, bleeding my kindness on the ground for the town, the devil and all the people caught up in this stuff. Others like me have been chosen, but I think there could have been even *more* chosen.

I'm going to start cutting myself. I found a chip of shale at the base of the rock around the other side, by the markings. It's flaky, but sharp. It'll cut. I'll bleed out more truth.

RAPIST, FINAL

I don't know what day it is. Don't know that it'd make much difference if I did. Things are a little hazy. The slices I made all up my calves, on the back of my hands and down on my inner thighs (that's where I especially like doing it) have all stopped bleeding. I can barely keep my eyes open.

Scotty came back to me again. At first, I thought I was dreaming up another vision, but it turns out he was real. Sometimes it's easy to tell the difference. Other times it's not so clear.

But he was real, all right. I drew strength from him showing up like that. He came up in his car and it woke me up. The sun was high and he stood a few feet from me, silent and still. We were like that for what felt like

an eternity. A real, honest-to-God eternity. Universes had been born and died in that time. Me sitting there, weak and shaking, and him standing in front of me, staring holes through me. I could see he'd been crying. I finally broke the silence.

"Hey, Scotty," I said, and my own voice sounded pretty weird. Like it wasn't my own. It was grimy and gritty and vibrated funny in my chest. He looked shocked, like I'd just slapped him in the face.

"I didn't rape you," he said.

"Yes, you did," I insisted. Then I said that it was okay, though, because I forgive him. He sat down cross-legged and looked into his lap.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said, and then started crying in front of me. I told him again that it was okay. Then I crawled over, my feet dragging lamely behind me, and I held onto him. He just shook and cried. His tears were warm on my face. We held each other for I don't know how long. At some point, he started blubbing.

"It's all so bad. I just wanted to be respected. I always wanted respect. That's why I became a cop. I wanted to be liked. Then you came along again. You reminded me. It's like you came out of nowhere to remind me what I really am. I was a kid! I was stupid. You know, always with the guys for a goof, but then there was you, at the playground...."

I shushed him. Petted his hair. I let the sight turn on and I tried to keep it quiet so he didn't hear. Every time I turn it on, I can hear it, a snap in my ears like a tree cracking and falling. I couldn't afford to let him hear it. I can't afford to let *anyone* hear it. But I had to see, because the sight doesn't lie. I had to see him with it on, and sure enough, there was a stain in his heart. I didn't see it directly, but I pictured one of those sucking tubes worming in through one of his holes and cutting straight into his chest. The poor man.

I said to him that he was just afraid, and he agreed. "I was afraid, yeah." And I said he was foolish. "I was foolish," he agreed. And I said it wasn't his fault.

He looked up at me. "I want to go back. I want to go home. I want to make it all go away."

"But you can't," I told him. "It happened. Forgive yourself. Do whatever it takes to pick the scab and make your scars. The scars will tell you what to do. They'll be a message from God."

That's when he got up, headed back to his car, and sat down in the driver's side with the door open. As dusk settled in, Scotty Kessler shot himself in the mouth. The sound echoed loud over the rocks and the town, and then everything was quiet.

WAKING DREAMS

I came out of a daze, with evening on its way. I was sweating like a pig. I smelled horrible. I couldn't move. I was paralyzed, locked or pinned down.

All I could do was look up, and I saw Scotty Kessler clinging to the rock-face like a spider. His head was twisted strangely and he had no face. It was smooth, like a Lego-man's face, but no ink smile, no black-dot eyes. Did I take his face away? When I made him kill himself, did that de-face him somehow? I didn't understand. In fact, I questioned if he was real at all or just a ghost that my eyes wanted me to see. It's getting harder to tell the difference.

Just thinking it made him scuttle away, all sideways like a crab, until he disappeared around the other side of the rock. So I looked over at his car and I saw the shadow of his dead body still resting on the steering wheel. He must've crawled back there while I wasn't looking. It wasn't real, I said to myself. The car, the gun shot, all one big tiresome joke. Just a fantasy. My unconscious mind trying to satisfy some subconscious whatever. He raped me, so now I made him kill himself in my head. What do they call that? Wish fulfillment. That's it. I'm so stupid. How could I have been fooled so easily?

So, I officially decided that it was a vision, and I expected he and the car to disappear in a puff of smoke, like when the Roadrunner zips off from the Coyote. But he didn't. He didn't go away at all.

ESCHATOLOGY

"You are *avadin*," the angel said to me, standing over me again. I don't know where he came from. It was night time. I'd been sleeping. Scotty Kessler's car was still there, and I imagined I could still smell the gunpowder, but I knew I really couldn't.

The angel continued, "You are servant. I am minister. Soon, though, you're going to be different."

I nodded, like I knew what he was saying, but I didn't. "Scotty killed himself because he couldn't stand his own self-hate," I said to the angel, but he ignored me.

"Soon," he said, tracing a cold, smooth finger around the top of my head, "you'll have a halo, a disk of light that signifies your power. But you have to keep holding on. This isn't over yet. Did you know that the origin of the word 'halo' isn't the same as for 'holy'?" I shook my head. "It's actually an agricultural term. Farmers used to thresh fields of grain in circles that the Greeks called halos. The circle is a powerful symbol,

and when they saw it in the sky around planets, they used it again."

"Like crop circles," I said weakly. I don't know where that came from, but it did, and there was no taking it back.

"Circles are messages telling us that all things move into one another. History and time, especially. There are two ways off a circle. One is through forgiveness. But if there is no forgiveness, then the circle must be destroyed. That's the other."

"Are you real?" I asked the angel. "Are you *them*? The Ministers? The Good Doctors?"

"I'm what you think of as 'them.' You understand us the way you need to, and one day soon that will let you open a channel. You'll be able to talk directly to the Creator. Won't that be exciting?"

"Do you have a name?"

"No, but you may call me Metatron. Or Djibriel. Or Lorna."

Somehow, it made sense that he had my name. So I said okay and did my best to smile for him.

The angel went on, "I'm going to show you some scenes of The End. Scenes that may happen if you don't persevere and do what needs to be done. Are you ready?"

I wasn't. Not at all. But I agreed anyway. What choice did I have?

There was a flash of light. My eyes burned. It felt like my lids had gone to cinders. I couldn't close my eyes, and what I saw terrified me.

I saw monsters stalking the earth, leaving behind footprints of blood. Inside each monster was a host of a hundred demons, rattling and shaking at ribcages like they were prison bars. The moon was red, just a bloody slice in the sky. There were no humans alive, only bodies piled on top of each other and made into walls that crisscrossed the landscape. The earth bled black blood like crude oil, percolating up out of the ground. It was all ruined. A shitty, ugly place. The monsters turned on one another and began eating each other. Some had teeth, others had claws. There was so much blood. Inside each of them, the demons were laughing. It wasn't a good sound. Then the light began dying and I imagined moths banging against a light bulb, bursting into puffs of smoke and spiraling to the ground. Then there wasn't anything, because the light died for good. There was only darkness.

Then I was pulled out of it. There was another flash of light and the angel smiled at me. "You see? A vision

of The End. But we've chosen you. You will help. The End still happens. There is always an end. But maybe we can make it through to a new beginning."

"A new beginning," I mumbled. My words felt mushy in my mouth, my breath stale and hot. "The bad things are getting loose, aren't they?" I asked.

"Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend," the angel sang, "before we too into the Dust descend!" Then he applauded himself, and winked at me. "That's from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*."

"But I don't have that book," I protested. And the angel was gone, *poof*, no more.

I fell back to sleep.

PARLOR TRICKS

It was only a few hours later that the shadowy man-beast came back to talk to me again. I noticed him right away. My sight activated without me even thinking about it, the sound of wood splintering in my ears. The man was alone.

"See what you've done?" he said, gesturing toward the police cruiser with Scotty slumped over the steering wheel. "You're already spreading the poison. Smearing it around like jam on bread. Nice fucking work."

"Where are your friends?" I asked.

"They were too afraid," he said bluntly. "But I'm not."

"What's to be afraid of?" I asked him?

"What are you? What the hell was that trick you pulled? Don't you see what you're getting into here? You're in way over your head. Me and my kind have been at this for *thousands of years*. Since you and your whole species was still in its shit-stained swaddling clothes! And here you come along and pretend to be Little Susie Save-the-Day, which is only going to get people hurt. You think tricks like the one you pulled are going to just stop the corruption that bleeds from that rock?"

"You want to see me do it again?" I said, smiling. My skin tingled. My stomach lurched and I felt puke coming up the back of my throat.

"Forget it," he said. "Do what you want. When you're finally tainted, I'll come for you. I'll wear your guts like tinsel."

"You're angry," I said in a sing-songy voice. "My mother used to say to my father that he was burning the candle at both ends. I never really got that until now. That's what you're doing."

But then he was gone again, stepping to the right and just up and disappearing. I laughed out loud, but didn't quite know why.

MICKEY

My son came to me again, and this time I was pretty sure it was going to be the last time I'd see him. I'd either die or I'd change into something else when I got my halo. He climbed down from the top of the rock, sat down close to me and cradled my head like I was a baby. I told him I was weak, that I might not be able to make it.

"You'll make it," he said. "You're going to see one more thing before it's all over. You're going to communicate with *her*. You're going to see her."

"Her?" I asked. He nodded and patted the rock gently. "The devil. You're going to meet her, and oh what a meeting it shall be."

"I'm afraid," I told him. And I was. Deeply. The fear was making my heart beat a thousand times a minute and I could hear the blood pumping in my ears like a raging river. I pictured my chest exploding. For a second I thought it really happened, and I had died. But Mickey told me I was okay, that I was just scared, that everything would be fine if I just stayed on the path. It helped. It didn't stop my blood from turning to ice water, but it helped. I felt like I wanted to die, even if I hadn't really died. Mickey nodded and said he understood, then put a kitchen knife in my hand.

"You'll know what to do if it comes down to it, if you get too scared to stay," he said. "It's very easy. My love for you will carry you through. You never got rid of me, Mom. I've always been here, in your womb. Do you feel me in there, tickling you?" He patted my stomach and I could feel him there.

"Where'd you get this knife?" I asked him, but he just made a *tsk-tsk* sound and said I had brought it with me and had it in my knapsack all along. I didn't remember bringing it, but he was probably right. I may have brought the world with me and just didn't remember.

Then Mickey was gone, though I could still feel him resting inside me. If he wasn't there, I think I'd have died. But even him being there didn't stop the fear. I was going to meet *her*. Deal with her. The devil in the rock. My reason and purpose for being here. It overwhelmed me. I threw up. At first, I just held the vomit in my mouth but that didn't last long and before I knew I was throwing up everything left in my belly.

I felt like a speck. Like the book I was living inside was all lies. Like somewhere along the way I took the wrong path into the bad forest. It stopped me from being a good daughter, a good mother. I picked up the piece of shale I'd used earlier and started cutting at my face. I hated myself right then. I'd wasted everything.

And then I figured it out. I could leave. I could just get up and leave. I could be what I was before and I could wake up from this dream. But how? How would I make that happen?

Then I looked at the cop car. Scotty, dead. Suddenly it all made sense. He had the keys to the car. I could crawl over there. Get in. Start it. And drive far, far away. I could drive away just like Scotty didn't. Never return. Never come back to this life.

Closing the door on this all was a suddenly satisfying idea, like I could just flip a switch and turn out the lights. No more visions. No more anything. I would forgive myself one last time and then go home.

I started to crawl for the car. Voices rattled in my head, chattering my teeth. *"Don't give up. Don't give up. Stop crawling. Stop yourself! You're almost done. Don't give up now! Don't throw it all away. Gain your halo. Leave the circle. Give them all the forgiveness they need."*

But I couldn't stop crawling, and I started screaming as the blood ran down my face. It got in my eyes and burned. Then a voice in my belly told me what I had to do and I did it. I took the knife and drew it across each hamstring. One slice. Two slice. The blood was everywhere. The pain was beyond anything I could've imagined, and everything went melting away as I finally came face to face with the devil in the rock.

THE DEVIL

My legs were bleeding, and for a fraction of a second I just knew that everything that had happened before that moment wasn't real. I had gone too far, dropped off the cliff and was falling. And then the rock started to darken. The sky darkened, too. When the devil's face emerged, it hit me like a fist that I hadn't imagined anything at all. Not even the visions. It was all 100-percent real. I wasn't a lunatic. I was someone who had seen the circle I was on and was struggling to get off it. I wasn't crazy, I told myself as the devil came to see me.

She was magnificent and terrible. Her body was bulbous and segmented. She reminded me of a big maggot. She bled from the rock and came out like a ghost. Her awful body was like a shaking, broken image projected on a screen at the back of my eyes. She half-seemed like she was there, and yet she wasn't. Was she really there or was she just in my mind? Did it matter?

Her see-through form slid down like a snake, and while she had no eyes (only a smooth, insect's head), I could feel her looking at me and scrutinizing me like a butterfly on a pin-board.

She spoke. It came into my head like another violation.



"You are a child. I don't know what you hope to accomplish here. You're a failure. I taste your weakness."

I cringed and winced and suddenly felt very small. I felt like food.

"Is that madness inside you? It is, isn't it? Am I even real? Or is there just a flaw in the parts of your brain that distinguish real from imaginary?"

I heard her laugh then, which sounded... I don't know... like babies crying. Then I noticed I was crying, and maybe I got the sounds confused in my head. I couldn't concentrate. My mind was dipping in and out. There was darkness at the edges of my vision and it was trying to put me asleep, but I wouldn't let it.

The words that came out of my mouth weren't mine, I thought. I mean, they were, and it was my voice, but I realized then that everything I was as Lorna was now someone else's. And that was okay by me, I decided, and answered the devil. I told her that everything was going to be okay, that I knew she was the way she was, twisted and wrong, because she was a slave. She had no control, she wasn't herself, and because of that she lashed out at others. Because *she* was corrupted, it became her nature to *corrupt*. I said I forgave her for being what she was — an abused angel made to be a devil. Then she laughed again. This time it sounded like glass shattering, and pain flared up in my head like a migraine. I felt the light building up behind my eyes.

"Forgiveness is a lie," she said. "The only truth is destruction. We'll destroy it all. We are legion."

"You can't destroy everything," I said, and realized I was yelling. I lowered my voice. "It'll last. We'll last. You can stop. Save yourself. Save us all and just go home."

"I will not stop. I cannot stop. Do not fool yourself."

"We all have to go home. Home is where the heart is, isn't it? Pumping and bleeding. All the angels and the devils do best when they're at home." I wasn't sure if I was making sense. I had to trust whatever owned me now.

She hissed. It sounded like the air let out of a tire. *"I have a town. One by one, they fall to me. Vessels have carried my intent. I shall make you one of my children as well, and then I shall be ever closer to coming through to your world once more and waking from my nightmares."*

"They're not *your* nightmares." But my words weren't loud, and I can't be certain I even said them. Maybe I just thought them. (But isn't that enough?) Everything was becoming hard to figure out. She had mandibles that looked like black, wet, steel rods, and from her mouth came a long tube, a spinning pipe with teeth. It moved toward my head and I felt it bury deep

into my brain like a needle. I knew then that I could be lost. I could find myself lost inside her. In her maze of guts and poison. I could summon up everything that had ever been done to me, I could revisit the rape and become it and wear it like a set of clothes, and then I'd be hers.

But something inside of my womb told me that I could resist, and so I did.

I became light for a moment and showed her that I was loved. It was a flash. Then I was an angel and she backed off, shrieking and twitching. It sounded like a train wreck. It sounded like my mother being murdered. It sounded like babies bleeding. She hissed and said, *"Incorruptible? Who's protecting you? Where are you from? Your mind may be defended but your body is not. You're just a moist bag of blood. Already weak. Already dying. I'm sending them. You're done."*

"I'm going to help you yet," I told her. There was power in my words, rising up out of nothing. My body felt distant and frail, but my mind felt strong. Like a wall.

"Don't be so confident. You're a tick on the back of a lion."

"I am powerful."

"You are dead."

And then she was gone, back to her prison.

CLOSING TIME

It's coming to a head. I can feel it. It's like that ozone thing you sense in the air before lightning strikes. Your hair raises. The air hums. Then electricity. Then thunder. Then nothing.

I don't know if I'm going to make it. Priests talk about clemency sometimes, and I think maybe I'm becoming Clemency-with-a-capital-C, but I don't know. I'm different, I know that much. I'm something that hasn't been before.

But I don't know that it's enough. It may be too little too late, as my father used to say. This devil may get me yet. The whole town might be hers; her sucking pipes pulling at their hearts. I think they're coming for me. I think they're going to kill me. How can I do my work for her and forgive her and teach her how to get home if they kill me? I don't know if I have the will or power to resist them. To push them away. Can't do it. I'm weak. Already lost a lot of blood. Tired. Hungry. Thirsty. They'll come and kill me and rape me.

Maybe someone up there will take pity on me. Or maybe I'll be skinned and left for the dogs. I'll either find the strength to get through this or I'm a dead woman. I bet it's going to be the second one.

SOON

That shadowy man came to me again, first as a wolf and then he changed into a person. He trotted up through the scrub, paws on the cracked ground, and then he was a man again. Still trying to hide.

"I should've killed you when I had the chance," he said. "They're massing, a bunch of them. They're all up in the high-school gym, sharpening their garden tools, loading their shotguns. Their eyes are glassy. They're owned and operated by that bitch that sleeps behind you. Didn't you know that? *Who do you think you are?*"

"You could help me," I said.

He shook his head. "No, I probably can't. I hope you have some more parlor tricks up your sleeve or you're dead meat. I couldn't help you if I wanted to. They'd beat the stuffing out of me like a piñata." A low growl rumbled in his throat. "This was all quiet before you got here. The town was corrupt, but it was quiet. They didn't bother anyone but each other, the bunch of inbreds. Then you came along. Petting a demon on the head. You woke her up, made her mad. Now I'm going to have to call in the big guns and see if we can settle her down again. It's a lot of work. Some of my friends might die in the process. I don't appreciate that."

My eyesight swam and darkened. "So I just get to die."

"That's the long and short of it. I don't like wanton murder — but I also don't like children with their hands in my cookie jar."

I decided he wasn't there. "I don't trust you're real anymore. Probably just a hallucination from the other side to make me lose my way. My faith is unwavering." I lied.

"I don't much care about your opinion of me. Or your faith. You monkeys have got it all wrong." He cleared his throat. "You're gonna be a bloody spot on that rock by midnight. I'm going to leave. So long. Sorry for everything, you know."

"I forgive you," I said, then laughed like a crazy woman. He turned and left.

AFTER

I'm still alive. Barely. I can feel pain in my bones. Did you know your bones could actually hurt? Right down to the marrow. Feels like nails are sticking in me. I'm growing numb and cold. That's a good thing, I guess, because then the pain will be done.

They came in the night. The dark man had it pegged. There had to be at least two dozen people. I recognized some of them. The barber who cut my hair when I was a little girl. Another was an attendance

secretary at the junior high. One man was a drinking buddy of my dad's. He owned a landscaping business down on North Street. (Or was it Green Street?) Were they always the playthings of this devil? Or had she taken them over in the last few years? At first, I thought maybe they weren't really hers, that maybe they were coming out to look for Scotty and they thought that I was somehow responsible.

But they didn't even blink an eye at the poor dead policeman. When I let the sight overtake me with a crack like thunder, I could see the poison, the tubes that sucked at their innards. Somewhere along the line, they were vulnerable. They became weak and unsure of themselves and let her inside. They probably didn't know it when it happened, and it certainly wasn't their fault. But the cycle continues, and they were her pawns as clear as the night sky.

I tried to talk to them. Tried to stop them, keep them away and make myself small and inconsequential, but it just wasn't in me. Some had weapons. One held a rusty corn sickle. Another had a deer rifle. Others just had bare fists.

They all spoke with *her* voice.

"*You thought you could save me?*" the drinking buddy asked. "*You think forgiveness matters?*"

Another woman in her bathrobe laughed and said "*I am not weak. I don't need your help. I am strong.*"

They came closer. The barber hissed like a cat. He dragged a baseball bat behind him, thumping it through the dry brush. "*Soon it'll all be over. The whole thing.*"

They were right. It would be over. But not the way they thought.

That's when they came at me, hard and fast, and I felt something sharp go into my thigh. Someone broke the stock of their shotgun over my shoulder and I felt a bone snap under its weight. Behind me, the devil rattled at the bars of her cage and I sensed her growing eager and hungry. I felt so sorry for her then. It must be terrible to have those cruel hungers, I thought. To have been warped and shaped into such a horrible thing, pulled from pleasant dreams and made terrible — a devil in a once-good world. How awful it must feel! The beating and stabbing became nothing to me, and I felt a warm center burn deep in my chest. I imagined how bad it must be for all these people to be chained up to their own worm-eaten hearts. To be so sad. To be imperfect.

I can only relate what happened next to the act of throwing up. It feels horrible at the time, but once it's over, it's like the sickness is gone. You're empty and you're healed. Light came up out of me, out of my mouth

and eyes. My arms jerked out and I seem to remember the townspeople falling backward. I heard something that made me think of meat cooking in a skillet. Sharp pops of grease and fat. The light was the brightest thing I'd ever seen. It fired up out of me and into the sky.

Alcoholics talk about a thing they get when they've realized they're sick, a "moment of clarity." I had one of those. It burned everything out of me. Every drop of sickness. I was an angel all along, and didn't know it till then.

The light didn't stop. It kept going. I couldn't see anything. There was nothing but sunlight, even though it was night. Closing my eyes didn't help. It just tore through, white, clean and warm. I was elated. Isn't that strange? I felt like I'd just had a bunch of cups of coffee and was energized and happy and ready to conquer the world with my love and understanding.

Then the ground rumbled. It was like a small earthquake, the ones that rattle the cups in a cupboard. There was a muted clap, almost like thunder, and the devil started screaming. At first I could hear it with my ears. Then I realized it was them — the townspeople — screaming for her, shrieking as a part of her. Then their screams were cut off, and turned to gurgles and chokes and then not much more. *Her* screaming continued, though, not in my ears but in my mind - a drill-bit whining in my brain.

As quickly as it had begun, it stopped, and the light flicked off as if a fuse had blown. It took a while for my eyes to adjust.

Left behind was a charred field of bone, a graveyard of skinless, fleshless bodies. Most were only a few feet away, with their shotguns and garden tools resting in the dirt, burned by fire. Behind me, I saw that the rock had been split and had a wide fissure, and I knew she was gone. Maybe I sent her home. Maybe I shined my light in the dark parts of her heart and she couldn't bear what she saw there. I like that theory. It gives me faith.

In the distance, I saw the town. It was burning. The whole thing was burning. The fire was almost white and I was reminded of the glare of the sun when I stare into it. Into the eye of the Creator. The whole picture was very pretty. Soothing, really. I imagined that angels frolicked in the flames. Then I decided that the burning town was what the Kingdom of All Good Things really looks like, and I decided I wanted to go there.

I've cracked the shell of my own understanding and found the fruit within. I have my halo. If we accept our mission and come to understand our own righteousness, we can cleanse any self-hatred we may have. We can step outside ourselves, outside of doubt, and heal the world. We'll all have our halos. We'll all be angels. Everything ends. We're just making the road that leads there a little nicer to walk.

Subject: Collbran, Colorado

From: bookworm55

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

If you haven't turned on CNN or checked BBC online or anything lately, I recommend doing so. You'll find all the pertinent details there, I guess, but I'll give you the short version here.

It was a little town, not big enough to have a stoplight. It started out as a factory town, but dried up somewhere along the way and eked out a kind of existence afterward. Well, the place burned down. And not with a fire that spread from house to house or store to store, but in one big, fast blaze. People were sleeping and burned up. Most of the town died. None of the articles have much to say about the cause. They say it might have been started by a big gas leak that went up a main line, and maybe they're right. I don't know enough about that kind of stuff to have an informed opinion.

But here's something: CNN released a video that's probably bouncing around the networks by now. It was a home movie. Some park ranger or something out there took it about a half-mile outside of town. The scene is gruesome — a big rock, a cop car and a bunch of burned bones.

What caught my attention was one of our signs on the far side of the rock. The guy holding the camera passes it right before the scene of whatever happened there. I saw it and just knew it meant. "Torment."

What the hell happened out there?

Bookworm



CHAPTER 3: THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

The nations have heard of thy shame, and thy cry hath filled the land: for the mighty man hath stumbled against the mighty, and they are fallen both together.

— Jeremiah 46:12

I'm in New York City. Boss sent me to have a look at Ground Zero. He was surprised — said that whoever did it “wasn’t important.” Seemed relieved, though I can never be sure what he’s really feeling. Shit, I can’t be sure he has feelings. Can’t be sure he’s a “he.”

Hell with it. New York is a dirty, crowded, stinking shit pile. Fumes — that’s all there is to New York. Traffic fumes you can smell even in the center of Central Park.

I see the signs up—all the gay little angel stick figures. Fight, fight fight. Protect, protect, protect. Looks like there’s at least two groups and they can’t agree. Typical hunter bullshit. There’s a third set of symbols — some of that pansy peace, loving, kindness, understanding stuff. Looks pretty old, though. Looks like no one’s been painting “Can’t we all just get along?” since last year.

Gang tags for the heavenly host. Cripes.

The Boss sees ‘em. Of course the Boss sees ‘em, he sees everything I look at. But I mean he *really* sees ‘em. He can tell which ones have juice and which ones are just a front. I don’t think he *understands* ‘em. Sometimes he asks me what they mean.

He could be bullshitting me, though. He can read my mind, kind of. Not if I really work at kicking his ass, but most of the time. Now, for instance.

Turn left up ahead.

Great. I hear and obey... jackass.

Sticks and stones won’t break my bones, you fat fudgy shithead.

You have any idea how annoying your voice is? It’s like nails on a chalkboard. When did you start with that, huh? You just like pissing me off? You didn’t used to sound so fuckin’ nasty.

Once you catch the fish, John, you put away the lure. Go toward the train station.

I don’t have much interest in hooking up with the local “imbued.” From what I remember, no one I’m interested in is in NYC. That old nigger bitch, uh... what was her name?

Memphis.

Thanks. How do you remember what I don’t?

Because I’m smarter than you.

Yeah, and more humble, too.

Humility is a virtue, and you know that's not my business.

Anyhow, she seemed to have her head on straight. But I probably won't try and find her. Without the Internet it'd be a pain in the ass anyhow. All I'd need her for is some fang-mangling.

Go up the stairs.

I head to the stairs to the subway platform, but there's a woman in front of me, blocking the way. Some tiny ancient bag. Looks like she spent her childhood trying to invent fire. Nubby, gray grandma overcoat, worn-heeled frumpy shoes, legs so twiglike that even her nylons can't cling so they pool around her ankles. She's got one of those home grocery carts — 'bout the size of a trash can, wire mesh, wheels — and she's pulling it up the stairs behind her. She's making about an inch a minute. Cripes. She goes up one step, bends her creaky old back, grabs the handle, and hoists the cart up a step. Step, lift. Then she pauses, like she's hauling fucking bricks.

"Here," I tell her. "Lemme help."

She looks up, timid. Face like a raisin with two bleary eyes.

"S'all right," I say and I pick up the cart. There's nothing to it. I can lift it one-handed. Probably full of cat food. That's what these old Social Security hags eat, right?

"Thank you." Some kind of accent. She turns around like a snail and creeps up the stairs to the platform. I put her groceries on the yellow stripe next to her and I get a yellow smile in return.

She's the one, John.

What?

She's the one. Kill her.

You're kidding me.

Look, you remember the deal, right? You're smart enough to recall that much?

I remember the deal, but come on. A little old lady? Isn't that carrying the whole 'diabolicalness' schtick kind of far?

Why do you care? I've kept my end of the deal, haven't I? Or would you rather be back with Annabelle?

Come on, it's not like she can hurt you or anything. She can't hurt anyone. Unless....

I flick on the sight. Nope, she's normal. Just one more old bird in a city full of them.

While the sight's up, Boss can't hear me — or, at least, he can't talk to me. It's pretty nice, having my mind to myself. Time for a cigarette. I smoke it all the way down before I get distracted.

Don't DO that!

Sorry, Boss.

Look, are you going to kill her or not? I'm not the fucking Red Cross here, John. You get a lot from me, so you gotta pay a little. Or do you want to face the next fang with nothing but your native intelligence and whatever scraps your 'Messengers' decide to throw your way?

I look around. Warnings about the third rail. No one else in sight. Shit.

It's not like she's going to miss out on much. She's 81. Her kids are both dead. If you don't do it, she's going to fall and break her leg in three months. She's going to thrash on her bathroom floor, pissing herself. No one will hear, and she'll die in absolute torment. Then her little dog eats off her. Honestly John, you're doing her a favor.

Since when are we in the 'favor' business?

Boss doesn't answer. For all I know, he's not paying attention anymore. He could be looking out someone else's eyes, hearing someone else's thoughts. I don't know how many of us there are. I've met a couple of his other errand boys and girls. He doesn't let me see many of them. He doesn't trust me because I can block him out sometimes.

I think I'm the only 'imbued' on his leash. I've got suspicions. I think some of his other people aren't even human.

I put my gloves on.

"Scuse me, miss?"

She looks up, another yellow smile.

"I think you dropped something." I point, she looks.

She barely weighs more than her groceries. Right on the third rail. Cripes, what a mess. Too easy. A goddamn shame. But who's gonna miss her? What's she missing out on?

I look in her groceries, pull out the bananas from the top and tip them off so they fall down by the rails. *Ta da.* Rational explanation. Daft senile bitch drops her fucking bananas, reaches down to get 'em, fries. The police won't care. They've got 6,000 other dead saps to deal with.

Still, it's a goddamn shame.

† † †

Night falls. I'm riding the subway, not really doing much. Funds are thin. Boss doesn't like me getting too much cash, I think. I've gotten handouts from his other tools when I'm really hard up. I think he likes me dependent.

John.

I twitch. Can't help it.

Get off at the next station and go up the south exit.

What, you found another old woman you want dead?

You wound me, John. I remember our deal, even if you don't. You'll like this next one, I promise.

Next stop is in the middle of some upscale, snob-ass district. People look at me like they can't decide whether to be scared or repulsed.

"Hey you. Yeah you, Armani suit. I'm talkin' to you, fuckhead!"

He runs. I smile. The rest of them keep their eyes to themselves. Goddamn city pussies.

Very impressive. You're all man, aren't you?

Then I see her, getting out of a limo like a movie star. Going toward a club, going right past the line, of course. Short red dress. Frothy golden hair shining like the sun on the sea. High heels. Perfect legs. Perfect ass. Perfect everything. I feel movement in my crotch and that's it.

She's the one, huh?

I told you you'd like her.

'Like' ain't the right word.

Like killing her, then. Go ahead, use your 'sight' on her. I don't mind. You don't really need to, though, do you? Only supernatural beauty can—

I use the sight just to shut him up. To break the spell. To see if maybe I'm wrong, maybe he's tricking me, maybe she's real, maybe...

Nope.

Dead. Bloated calves where the fluid's gathered. Hair, dry like straw, falling out in patches. Withered mummy hands, dry lips, maggots.

I'm across the street at the same door. Horns honking at me, but I don't care, I'm locked on, I see her disappearing down the dim hall.

"Hold it, buddy."

A bouncer. Big guy. Tight shirt. A gym tough. He looks me over and glances over his shoulder, quick like. A couple more muscle-bound faggots with 'Security' on their shirts back him. Sight's still on. The one guy's a blood-fuck, a slave.

"I'm with her," I say. I say it loud enough for her to hear me, and I put the juice behind it. An angel trick. You wanna look luscious to me, bitch? I got that trick now, too. I'm your man. I'm your seven-course meal.

She hears. She turns. She sees me, and one rotted eyebrow quirks up over a runny hole.

"It's okay," she purrs. "Let him in."

Cripes! I gotta drop the sight or I'm gonna puke.

Suddenly, she's everything I want again. Everything I need. She's an ice-cream soda on a hot day with fried chicken and a nap in a hammock.

Cool your jets, Romeo, unless you want those grave worms giving you head while you fuck her.

"Thanks," I mutter. She thinks I'm talking to her.

"My pleasure." She licks her lips and takes my arm. I quiver. I can't help it. Lust? Disgust? Both at once.

The club is dark and loud and full of rich city fucks dancing like idiots and showing off their aerobicized asses. It's like a zoo for pansies. Maybe two of the waitresses and one of the door guys are *real* — people who actually work for their money. Everyone else is a phony, an out-of-work actor or an artist or a marketing manager or a managing marketer. Fuckwits, one and all. I don't want to even look at them. Not that I can keep my eyes off *her* for long.

"You want something to drink?" Her voice is like honey. Like sleep.

"Beer," I mutter.

"Your brand?"

"Whatever's on tap."

"Not picky, then?"

"Not about beer."

She gestures to a waiter who gives me a jealous look. As he flutters off, she looks back at me.

"So, what's your name?"

"Don."

"Do you have a last name?"

"Do you care about my last name?"

She laughs. It's music, waves on a beach, a lullaby.

"I'm Amy."

"You don't look like an Amy."

"What do I look like?"

A vampire. A supermodel. An oozing, maggoty corpse. Annabelle. "I think you know how you look," I say at last. "If you don't, try a mirror."

Another laugh. I'd never get away with this without the angel mojo.

"I don't know how I look to *you*, Don."

"You look good."

She stands up — stands up in a way that puts her tits right in front of my face for a moment. Cripes.

"Do you want to dance?"

"No."

She pouts. I almost cave in. I'll dance. I'll do the goddamn Funky Chicken if she wants me to. But she likes me playing with her, so I'm allowed to resist.

She's like a sport fisher. She likes it when I pull back on the hook.

"If you don't want to dance, why come to a dance club?"

"I'm a shitty dancer."

"You know, a lot of women watch a man dance to see how he makes love."

Makes love. Cripes. "When I dance, it looks like I'm trying to hurt somebody."

"Is that how you look in bed, too?"

I shrug. She knows how to find out. "The only reason a straight guy dances is to get fucked. I'm a bad dancer, so it doesn't help me. So why do it? Life's too short."

"It is indeed." Her eyes gleam. "So you came here to... get fucked?"

"Is there another reason?" The waiter puts down my beer and gets to hear this part of the conversation.

"Why don't you give me the check," Amy says. She's still standing, standing so that I can look at her legs, her ass. "C'mon. Let's go."

I take a deep sip of the beer. I don't move. I look at her a little. I'm pulling the line. We both know I'm going to go. Another drink and I stand. "Yeah, okay."

I'm following that delicious ass back out to the limo, thinking about what she looks like naked, remembering what Annabelle looked like naked.

Sight her, John.

Mind your own goddamn business.

You're my business, damned or otherwise. I mean it. Sight her. Otherwise you'll bliss out when she puts the fangs in, and you'll be worthless to me. Amy would drain you dry before she lets you bang her — she's not into sex anymore. Sight her, get her alone, then say my name. That'll put the sight off.

You're telling me how to kill vampires now?

I'm telling you how to kill this one. If you light a cigarette in the car, the flame will startle her. Now call the sight!

Deep down, I know he's right. Her chauffeur scuttles out to get the door. He's a blood slave, bowing and scraping to Miss Maggot America. He could be trouble — the blowback edge doesn't work on them reliably. He's probably got a piece, too.

The limo has a sunroof in the back. So that's maybe something.

Bitch leaves a trail of slime like a snail when she slides over to make room for me in back. She pats the seat — coy. Flakes of dead skin crackle off as she does it. But it's just blood and guts. No problem. I take my seat.

"Can your driver listen in on us?"

She puts up the retractable wall between the front seat and the back. Why not? She figures I'm some normal loser. Not a threat.

"I'd ask 'your place or mine,' but it's a cliché." Her giggle sounds like gargling broken glass.

"Ain't got a place anyhow," I say.

"Then how about mine?"

"Or I could just nail you here in the car."

She raises an eyebrow. "Impatient?" She gives a playful swat at my knee. I swallow back puke.

"You could say that."

"Well, you'll just have to wait until we get to my place." I feel a little tug at my brain. She's tired of me playing. She's ready to reel me in, gut me and set out her next hook.

I don't want to get stuck in her lair. Sure, it'd be quiet, but getting out would be a pain. What that dickhead Soldier would call 'extraction.' Still, I don't want to put her defenses up just yet. I pretend like it's working. "Fine," I say sullenly. I slide back and look out the window. "How far is it?"

"Not far. Just on the other side of the tunnel."

I put a hand over my mouth to hide my smile. A New Jersey vampire. What, not even immortals can afford to live in Manhattan anymore? Or maybe she's worried about some psycho terrorist shitfuck living next door.

I'll do it in the tunnel. Not long now.

"Don." Her hand's on my knee again. I hope she thinks I'm squirming because I'm turned on. "Don't be like that. I'm too old for screwing in backseats."

I can see her reflection in the window. Licking her raggedy rot lips. It's less nasty than watching face to face. I can see the opening of the tunnel coming up, close.

I turn back and pull out a pack of Camels. "Want one?" I look in her eyes and pull out two with my mouth. I think Bogart lit a cigarette for himself and Lauren Bacall this way in some old flick.

Zap — one raggedy rot-hand flicks out, cat-fast, and knocks the smokes from my mouth. "Disgusting habit," she says, sneering.

We're in the tunnel.

Fuck it. It's time.

"So's drinking blood." I flick my lighter right in her face — a little flame, but rots hate that shit. She rears back and her fangs pop out as I speak The Word.

"Vassago!"



The sight blows out in my brain like a match in a hurricane. The hard, burning angel-light is swallowed up by Vassago's darkness. It flows into me from everywhere, through me, changing me. Thorns grow from my face, curving out around the edges like a beard and a crown. They come from my palms and elbows and the tips of my wings.

She gets one bone-crunching punch in at my face before I transform all the way.

"Back!" The angel edges still work, even with Vassago working through me. Crazy. Blowback slams her against the door and she's beautiful again, everything precious, every girl I was too poor and dumb and big to ever talk to. She's scared and I love it.

She fumbles the door open and an arm falls out and hits the moving pavement. Her dumbass chauffeur hasn't figured out anything's wrong, but I'm not letting her get away. Hook-horn palms grab those sweet, slim ankles, shredding skin and nylon equally. I reel her back into the car. The arm that hit the ground is broken, but it's healing as I watch. Don't care. I jam my chin spikes in below her knee and I rake upward. She hits my head, but not so hard this time — she has to

punch carefully. Doesn't want to impale her pretty hand on my barbs and spines.

I raise my head for another chin-jam, right into that flat, tight belly. That's when the car jerks to a stop. Both of us roll off the seat and her legs rip free from my grip. She's out the door before I can grab her again, but I push off with legs and wings. I get a good hook-hand, two-palm rake on her back, a real hard shove that tears chunks out.

She stumbles forward, a high heel breaks, and she teeters and falls right in front of some creaky old pickup truck. It ain't going fast, but that doesn't matter when it rolls over her head.

She turns to dust. Sweet.

John, look out!

Something hard and sharp hits me in my left side. Cripes! Feels like I've been hit by a sledgehammer. I turn and it's the goddamn chauffeur! The inside window is down and he's lining up his second shot. Fuck!

I run away from her door and I can feel the monster body vanishing, the thorns turning to smoke and the wings fading into shadow. I'm limping down the tunnel toward oncoming traffic. I think I feel the Boss pushing

the bullet out, jerking my muscles back into place, making blood in my veins out of nothing at all.

I wonder if this is what *they* feel like when they turn off injuries.

Eyes on the prize, John. Cut back and forth, you idiot. He's aiming again!

I can hear a million horns going off. I must look crazy. My shirt and coat are both burst wide open in back. My shoes have holes in the soles from my foot-claws, but they're still usable. Another gunshot. I flinch but it's already missed. By the time you hear it, it's too late.

Go right! In that doorway!

The door's off its hinges and I'm in some access tunnel, all dust and rat shit and old newspapers.

I can hear sirens, and for once it's a good thing. That asshole driver's going to get his in jail tonight, or he's going to spend the next half-hour running scared. Either way, he's not shooting at me anymore.

I take stock. Boss didn't heal me all the way — just enough to let me run without tearing my spleen out or something.

You think keeping your mangy hide together is easy?

It's not a big deal. I got an angel trick to handle the rest of it. I can already feel my jaw coming back together. It hurts like a motherfucker, but it's just pain. The bullet hole's gonna take longer. I'd better take it easy for a couple days.

Good plan. In fact, you can sleep on the bus.

Bus?

There's a bus ticket waiting for you at Grand Central, under the name 'Ron Chaliar.' See that staircase ahead of you? Go up it and follow the passage to a sewer-access hatch.

Sewers? Again?

Just storm sewers. Don't be such a pussy. When you get out, start walking southwest. One of my people will be along soon. She'll give you enough money to get some new clothes and maybe a place to stay tonight.

You're all heart, Boss.

I just don't want you fucked up and coughing like last time. You'll need to be sharp, John. It won't be some overconfident newbie fang. Shit, you almost got killed because you stood around gloating when you should have been running!

Your concern is touching.

Unlike you, I don't underestimate threats, especially the threats posed by our mutual enemies.

'Our mutual enemies.' Shit, I keep telling you, the 'imbued' aren't such bad asses.

Not against you, John. That's why I use you against them.

† † †

The woman who picked me up in New York was well dressed, driving a Lexus, but she had that sickly, drippy-nosed look that all of the Boss' 'people' seem to have. It was weird: When she saw how chewed up I was, she insisted that I spend the night at her place. Not in any kind of funny way, just... like I was a long-lost cousin who was down on his luck. Instead of... of whatever the hell we are.

She gave me a bunch of books for the bus trip, too. Nothing *good*, of course, like Dick Francis or maybe Dave Barry. Just this highbrow shit that the Boss wants me to read. *Discipline and Punish. A Brief History of Time. Some horse-choker called The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind.* For fuck's sake. Brainiac stuff. I can't understand a word.

I'm not asking you to understand them, John. Only to read them.

I'm doin' it, I'm doin' it. But I'm not reading the one about faggots!

Ecce Homo is not... oh, fuck it. Just look at the page, you brachiating dimbulb.

What did you call me?

'Brachiating.' It means you swing through trees like an ape. Honestly, John, doesn't it bother you that I have to talk down to you to insult you?

"Does it bother you to rely on a tree-swinging dimbulb?"

I see movement from the corner of my eye. A woman across the aisle is looking at me funny, and I realize I'm talking loud. I glare and she shrinks back. I hold up the book and act like I'm really into it.

Smooth move, Ex-Lax. Let's just hope she doesn't tell anyone about the 6'4" 280-pound man she saw on the bus talking to himself. You've got to be more careful! It's not like you're easy to forget, you know.

What? You mean being a giant freak somehow makes me... stand out? Gee, Boss, I'd never fuckin' noticed.

Your sarcasm is not appreciated, John. And to answer your question: More than you can imagine.

Huh?

Relying on you bothers me more than you can imagine.

Screw him, anyhow. I can just skim this stuff.

At least the chick in New York got me a good gun.

† † †

I get off the bus in Canton, Ohio. Town doesn't look like much. Boss still hasn't told me who I'm going to find

here. One of those jaw-flapping dick drips from hunter-net — all according to the deal. Which one, I got no idea. Don't even know where I'm supposed to go, so I figure I might as well get some food before the shit starts.

My jaw feels fine. Side's a little sore is all.

There's a greasy spoon by the bus station. Probably a prime location for drifters, bums, serial killers — and 'the imbued.' America's own hometown heroes, normal folks like you an' me who lead exciting, super-powered, secret lives fighting ghosts and vampires! And, incidentally, losing all their goddamn money, losing all their goddamn friends, and winding up in jail or the crazyhouse.

I've got \$38.64. I belly up to the counter and look at the specials. The guy at the counter slouches over.

"Yeah, I'd like two Sunrise Specials an' a large tomato juice."

"Large tomato juice, Sunrise Special."

"No, *two*."

"Two?"

Looks like someone skipped their second day of kindergarten and never caught up.

"The special's two eggs, hash browns an' toast, right?" The guy looks like I just asked him to flap his arms and fly to the moon. "Well, what I want is *four* eggs, a *double* order of hash browns and, you know, two toasts. Two specials. See?"

"Four eggs, double hashbrowns, double toasts."

"Thanks."

Asshole.

Why don't you order some bacon?

Is that one of your commands?

No, but I know you want it. Smells good, doesn't it?

You know about the packing house. Screw that bullshit. If I didn't clean it myself, I'm not eating meat.

Oh, and you think the 'chef' back there is washing his hands every time he takes a dump?

Please, look... I don't want to know, okay? *I do not want to know.*

Fine. Cling to your petty illusions. Whatever makes you happy.

Since when do you care if I'm happy? You want to tell me who I'm after this time?

I'll let it be a surprise, but you'll like it.

Last time you told me that I got shot in the back.

You got yourself shot in the back, but I'm not going to argue with you. After lunch, make your way east. There's a homeless shelter called 'Marta Samson House.'

Homeless shelter, huh? Figures.

After lunch, I have \$29.62. The dingbat waiter gets no tip.

† † †

Marta Samson House is not really a house. It's a big building made of cinderblock, all square edges and a flat roof, like a factory. There's a huge smokestack in the back of it, not producing any smoke. There's a huge parking lot around it, backed on two sides by scrubby bushes and trees. One side's to the street and the other's got a chain-link fence with barbed wire on top, fencing in another parking lot that looks pretty much identical. Run-down houses line the street, along with seedy-looking businesses that were marginal a decade ago. A pawn shop. Something called "Smithberg Ice." An electronics repair shop. Hell, who gets electrical stuff fixed nowadays? Just cheaper to buy a new one.

No idea who I'm supposed to do here or how I'm going to find whoever it is. I got the address out of a phonebook at the diner. It was about eight miles from the bus station. With nothing better to do, I hoofed it. My feet are killing me: I'm still wearing the torn-up shoes from New York.

It's getting toward sunset when I reach the place. Now what? Boss isn't giving much in the way of guidance. Great. He must be in a playful mood.

I walk through the parking lot, past a lot of beater cars and trucks, lots of 'em packed full of people's crap tied up in plastic trash bags. Pretty sad. Guess I'm sadder, though. I don't even have a bag of crap or a beater to put it in.

There's a couple guys wearing wornout coats and stocking caps going through a steel door on the side of the building, so I follow them. Looks like the right place. These guys have 'working poor' written all over them, probably like me.

Inside is a small cafeteria—linoleum floor, cinderblock walls, saggy drop ceiling. It's the sort of thing you get in a high school, only with a TV bolted to the ceiling showing a football game, and the food's probably not as good. Crowded, too—tables all tight together and lots of people wearing lots of clothes with lots of dirt and sweat. There's a line for food, which is being served by better-dressed, church-volunteer types. They're stepping pretty lively, schlepping trays of grub back and forth out of the kitchen, trying to be cheerful. Each one's moving at least twice as fast as the fastest of the homeless, unless you count the homeless kids. There's not too many youngsters—three or four grubby rugrats in oversized T-shirts running around the tables and getting scowls or smiles from the grownups. For the moment, I just look.

"Scuse me," says a wheezy voice behind me. I turn. I must be blocking traffic. A withered old black man with a face like the meat of a walnut squeezes past me.

"Sorry," I say.

"You sign up yet?"

"Uh, not yet."

"Better, 'fore all the beds fill up."

"Right... where I do that, 'zactly?"

He points. There's a guy at a steel desk near the front of the mess line. People shuffle up, show him little laminated cards, then get trays and get served.

I get in line. Fuck, my feet hurt.

"Evening," the desk guy says when I reach him.

"Hi."

"You homeless?"

"Uh, yeah."

He looks me over.

"You're not registered here," he says, like he'd remember me.

"No, I'm not."

"You local to the area?"

"Nah. I'm from Washington."

He sucks his teeth as if to say "too bad for you."

"If you're not local, I can give you a place for the night as a courtesy." He starts writing on a little piece of colored cardboard, like a library card. "Tomorrow though, you'll have to go somewhere else."

"Uh... what's that?" I point to a symbol on a torn-out corner of paper taped on the desk. He looks up with his eyebrows up a notch, eyelids down a notch.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yeah, it's like... sacrifice. Giving yourself, kinda thing." I lean in and draw a symbol of my own: protection.

His face gets hard. "In that case, I'm afraid I can't even offer you the courtesy night."

Crap. The homeless heroes have been here all right.

"Fine. Whatever. Can you tell me where the guy who drew it went?"

"None of my concern."

"Look." I put my hands on the table and let him see the torn up ring finger on my right hand. I lean in and give him a glare. It's a good one, but he's seen pissed-off losers before. "You had trouble, right? I'll bet you don't even know what kind of trouble. I bet you don't want to know. Well, if you don't want anymore trouble, maybe you better get rid of me fast. You tell me where he is and I'm out of your hair."

"Hey, yer holdin' up the line!"

I turn the same glare on the guy behind me and he pipes down quick.

"Fine." Deskjockey's made his decision. "Look for your buddy down at Camp Crazy." Then he gestures for me to step out of the line.

On my way out the door, I grab a couple oranges and a brownie for dinner. I get dirty looks, but no one says anything.

† † †

From the bums smoking cigarettes outside the back door, I find out where — and what — 'Camp Crazy' is. It's pretty much a shantytown down by an old rail line, walking distance from Marta Samson. It's where the bums who can't cut it at the shelter go. There's a little path beaten through the scraggly woods. I eat my oranges as I go, wiping my fingers on my coat. I wonder who it's gonna be. Dictatrix? Hannibal? They don't strike me as the types to wind up tramping. Sure, they talked a great game about sacrifices, but I'm guessing they make their sacrifices from somewhere comfortable. Memphis might end up squatting. Certainly not Witness1. That chickenshit fucko's gotta be somewhere warm and cozy, posting about hunting monsters while he's hunting for the last Dorito in the bag.

The woods end and I'm at Camp Crazy. The sun is down and a trashcan fire lights the scene. A couple bums are squatting around it, bitching and passing a 40. I can smell malt-liquor puke as I get closer. Yeah, this is where the imbued belong, all right.

Most of the place is just tacked-together plastic sheeting and tarps, but there's one no-shit tent. Looks like army surplus from the Korean war, but it's a tent and it's put up proper and — painted on the side in bright yellow is the tag for "selfless." What a joke.

Coming out of it is a skinny black guy, and it takes me a second to recognize that asswipe Travis Miller.

Boss was right. This is gonna be good.

Right now, I could do him clean. He's facing the fire, I'm out in the darkness. He can't see me unless he's using a power. And why would he? Why waste the angel juice? I could draw that sweet New York gun and pop him.

Why don't you do it already?

"Hey, Travis."

Fuck, here we go.

He jumps. I startle him. He peers into the gloom, and then his eyes get wide.

"John Coaler?" He doesn't sound mad or scared or anything. Just really surprised.

"Small world, ain't it?"

"How'd you end up here?"

"Oh, I always stop by Camp Crazy when I'm traveling through Ohio." I spare a glance for the guys at the fire. They're oblivious, bickering over the last backwash mouthful. I could butt-fuck Travis right in front of his tent and they wouldn't notice.

Travis — goddamn Traveler72 — is moving closer to me. He looks like he hit hard and took a long slide. He's skinnier, more hurt looking. Wearing an army-surplus jacket, breathing on his hands to keep 'em warm, then stuffing them in his pockets.

"So," he says, getting a little closer. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, the usual. Fool killing. Yourself?"

John, why don't you grease him and get out of here? Look, do him now and I'll get you a fucking money order.

Miller gives me a long, hard look. Finally, he makes some kind of decision. "Was over in Pennsylvania, helping a kid and his group. It all went bad. Now I'm headingsouth. You hear about Driver300? Henry Eames?"

"Nah. Maybe it was after I got booted from the list."

The reminder doesn't do a thing to him. Idiot.

"I'm heading down to try and hook up with him and Pedro. We're gonna try and get him his daughter back. He's got some cash...."

"Which you need."

"You look like you could use a hand-up, too, John. Unless your Rolls-Royce is parked somewhere I can't see."

I chuckle. Can't help it. I'd forgotten how funny the bastard can be.

"Pedro's a good man," I say, remembering. "Didn't he have some kind of heavy fang action after him?"

Travis is quiet for a moment.

"They got his family," he says.

Shit. Pedro was one of the good ones. Had his head on straight, at least about some things.

"That's a goddamn shame."

"I think we've all had our losses," he says, and the way he says it, I suddenly realize that he's feeling sorry for me.

Now I'm pissed. Before I even know it, the gun's in my hand, the New York gun with the compact silencer and the fancy laser sight stuck on the trigger guard. It's in my hand and the red dot's on Miller's chest.

Fire! Do it now!

I don't, though, and suddenly he's got a piece out, too. A fast draw. Wouldn't have expected it from a traveling salesman.



"You got *no idea* about my losses, you prick. You bad-mouth me all over the list and then you assholes cut me off and hang me out to dry. You *knew* I was a marked man, but none of you gave a shit. No one helped *me*. You were too busy empathizing with some death-row convict - too busy lending a sympathetic ear to vampires and witches and fucking *dead* people. Now you think you can just open your arms and we're pals again? That since I *didn't* get munched by the creatures you *abandoned* me to... it's all *okay*?"

Bravo, John. Real pretty speech. If this was a movie you'd get a friggin' Oscar.

Travis just gives me a sad look and says, "I didn't know it got so bad for you."

More pity. "Too little, too late, motherfucker."

He looks me right in the eyes and he lowers his arm. He opens his hand and his gun dangles loose on his finger. "I'm not going to fight you, John. Make your choice."

What the fuck?

Kill him! He's fucking with your head. Kill him now!

"Isn't this the part where you say, 'If you strike me down, I only become more powerful'?"

Travis shrugs. "No. If you strike me down, I die. That's all."

I can't do it. Shit. I can't shoot. My finger won't move.

"Hey, whatchoo doin'?"

BAM!

Miller falls.

It's one of the goddamn winos! He stumbled over to see what was going on and he.... Cripes, he startled me and I killed Miller. He's running off into the woods, but he's drunk and old and not hard to catch. I do him, too. The other bum by the fire is passed out, but I might as well make a clean sweep.

No. Take the silencer and the laser sight off the gun, wipe it down good, and put it in his hand. Make sure to get both sets of prints on it, in case he's a southpaw. Then check Miller's stuff — he probably had money, maybe food. Take his gun.

I hear and obey.

And make sure you killed him with one shot.

† † †

Damn. I should feel great about wasting Miller, but somehow I don't. All that 'make your choice' crap at the end. He spoiled it for me. Still, he's dead and I'm alive, so that's worth something.

Miller had \$42 in his wallet, plus a train ticket from Columbus to Atlanta. Even better, it's a sleeper, so I get some privacy on the trip.

Getting to Columbus isn't too bad. From Camp Crazy, I hoof it to a flophouse — so much for Miller's money. Next day, I find a haulage company, tell 'em I'll help unload a truck in Columbus in return for a ride and a hot meal. The best kind of under-the-table labor is the totally unpaid kind, so they're cool with it. Then it's just the usual shit — lift this, put it there, wait a long time on the drive, then pick the same stuff up again and move it somewhere else. The trucker's okay — not yappy. We say maybe a dozen words to each other, and he drops me at the train station when he's done. I think his name is Mike.

It's on the train that I really start thinking about Miller and why it wasn't like I wanted.

Because you stopped to gloat, like you always do. If you'd just killed him when I said, you'd be happy as a pig in shit right now.

Maybe. Maybe not. Who's next?

You'll see. Get off the train one stop before Atlanta.

You sure we're on one of yours? 'Cause it's not like I needed the monster body to take Miller down.

Without me, you never would have found him and you know it.

Yeah, yeah... but when am I gonna get to do the big ones?

Oh, you want to kill the pop superstar?

I actually hear him laughing in my brain. It's like he's working my eardrums with a cheese grater.

John, she's got chunks of guys like you in her crap. You might be able to avoid her human bodyguards. The body doubles won't fool your sight. But her blood slaves could certainly take you if they worked together. You might be a match for any two of them, with some luck. Past them, though, there are a good hundred vampires who would happily kill everyone you've ever met to get on her good side. And on the other side of them — and the cops who would come running — is VH1's own version of the Queen of the Damned. Facing her, you've got two choices. You can have my advice and no sight, in which case she turns your brain into bubblegum and you're back at square one. Or you can use the sight and have no chance of stopping her when she runs, or of finding her when she gets away.

You promised her to me.

And you'll get her, John... when you're ready. But you're going to need a string of fall guys and other helpers, and you're going to need more juice from me.

Which I get by doing your 'dark bidding.' How convenient.

You understood the deal when you signed on. You're a consenting adult.

What about Witness1? He's no rock star. When can I kill him?

When the time is right. Granted, he doesn't have an army of flunkies, but your motherfucking 'Messengers' seem to like him an awful lot. You'll need to get close to him so fast that he doesn't have time to get away — and trust me, that cowardly piece of shit is an expert at getting away. Plus, you need to nail him the first time out. Otherwise, he'll be ready for you.

Fine. Whatever. I'm not tough enough to kill some sissy-ass computer nerd.

John, don't sulk. It's pretty sickening from a 34-year-old man.

† † †

The town where I get off is a flyspeck on the map. I'm surprised it even has its own train station. The Boss is pretty much quiet, and my cash supply is under \$20. Screw him. It's time to get a job.

I find one at a local seed and feed and motor oil kind of place. Usual setup: I unload shit in the back warehouse for five bucks an hour under the table, paid daily. Owner doesn't know I block the door open and sleep there the first night, or he ignores it. Two days of labor that these Kentucky-fried pussies probably consider back-breaking and I'm a hundred to the good, less some meals.

Evening of the second day, Boss sends me out. It's dusk and I'm just walking through this nice little town, people pretty much ignoring me, heads stuck up their own asses. Boss leads me to a park. It's an unseasonably warm day, and the parents are making the most of it, letting their kids off the leash for one last hurrah before a winter stuck inside, whining and watching *Aladdin* for the umpty-zillionth time.

The blonde, John.

What blonde? Way over there with the stroller?

No, right in front of your stupid face. The little girl.

"No!" I say it loud, but the kid doesn't even look.

What do you mean 'no'? We've got a deal! One for you, one for me, one for both together!

A little girl is too fucking much.

What, you think you get to obey when you feel like it? Look up 'obey' in the dictionary, asshole! While you're at it, check out 'demon' — it probably mentions something about being... y'know... evil.

The deal is, I help ice your enemies, you help me with mine, and we work together on the mutual ones. A grade-school girl is not an enemy.

You don't know how she grows up. In just 10 years....

Huh uh. I think you're bullshitting me. I don't think you can predict like that. I read on the Internet, all those guys who can get little glimpses and they say even 10 minutes starts to fall apart. Predictions get weird. Details change.

Oh, now you're listening to those morons? John, a deal is a goddamn deal. You got Amy in New York. Together, we got Travis. Now it's my turn and I pick her!

She's no threat to you.

And you think that old bitch in the train station was? You know what, John? I lied about her. I lied about her kids. She's got two grown daughters, and one of them was bringing a newborn grandson to see her. Did you see the cake mix in her groceries? She was going home to bake them a cake when—

I sight him out. This is bad. This is seriously fucked up.

I go over to the little girl. She's got some kind of rabbit doll and she's combing its ears like hair.

"You. Little girl."

She looks up and gets scared right away. I'm not surprised.

"Run to your mommy. Tell her you wanna go to church *right now*, you got me? If you don't, you're in real trouble. Church, *right now*! Cry until she takes you."

She's just staring.

"Go now!" I reach out with my right hand, spread it like a claw, let her get an eyeful of my mangled ring finger.

That does it. She's off like a gunshot, screaming and hollering.

I head in the other direction. I'm a long distance from the train or the bus station, and a town this small doesn't exactly have taxis roaming the streets, but screw it. I'm getting out of town before the Boss can tune me back in.

I make it about five blocks, really concentrating, before he comes back.

TRAITOR! BASTARD! SHIT-EATING FAGGOTY FUCK! YOU'LL PAY FOR THIS, JOHN COALER!

Holy crap, I can feel him doing something to me, something horrible. It feels like a million maggots are eating my guts from the inside. He's killing my head, my ears, my eyes. I put the sight on again and it eases back, but I'm still dizzy and trashed. I stumble down behind some bushes to puke and I see a church, a little one that looks like it used to be a school or something. I rush it and try the door. The handle stings my hand — what the fuck? Static electricity or the wrath of God? Who knows? It's locked, but it's



wood and it doesn't take more than a couple shoulder-hits before I'm in.

Cripes, I feel shitty all over. Sore. Like when your feet go numb. That deep pain when the circulation comes back. Only it's not my feet, it's everything.

I ease off the sight. Nothing.

I'm safe on hallowed ground, but for how long?

God, now that I've stopped running, I can feel how bad my gut hurts. It's like food poisoning. What do I do? I could go back, do the little girl, make it up to the Boss.... Naw, screw that. No way. There's a line, and I'll do some nasty stuff, but a little girl who never did anything to me or anyone else? Nuh uh.

But if I don't, what's the Boss gonna do to me? He's in my head. It's not like I can kick him out permanently. And he can hurt me whenever he wants, from wherever he is. Remote control. How long can I resist that?

No way out.

Well, maybe one.

I get Miller's gun out. He said, "I die. That's all." Maybe he's right. Maybe not. Maybe if I ice myself, Boss eats my soul, takes over my corpse, burns down the church, finds the little girl and kills

her with my monster body. But at least then it wouldn't be me.

I look right down the barrel.

Screw it. Why should I kill myself? That's for fuckin' losers like Anonymous52 and that XXX guy. I been in tight spots before. Worse spots than this. I was on the boat and I got off alive. That warehouse thing Miller was so tight-assed about. Sure, Billy overreacted, but we'd been through some nasty shit. I got out alive there, too.

Annabelle. I got away from her.

So maybe Boss kills me. So what? No big loss. Not even to me. But it'll be one piece of dirty work he has to do himself.

Shit, someone's coming!

"Hello, anyone there?"

Cripes, it's the priest. I get my scarf up over my nose before he flicks on the light. When he sees the gun, his hands fly up to his mouth, like an old lady.

"Don't move!"

"It's okay, my son, it's okay, it's okay!" He's babbling.

"You got a car, Padre?"

"Uh huh!"

Answer to my prayers.

"All right, put the keys on the pew there and you get out alive. Good. Kneel down. Like you're praying, right."

"Son, you don't have to—"

"Father, it's okay. I do, really. Just be quiet now, 'kay?"

His back is to me and I loop the scarf around his neck. He thrashes and claws at it a little, but nothing too bad. When he's out, I check him. No bruises, still breathing. Perfect. He didn't see my face. Everything's cool.

With the sight on tight, the Padre's Chevy gets me to the train station. I leave the keys locked inside. My well-earned seed and feed cash gets me on the next train, which happens to be to Montgomery, Alabama.

It's kind of funny. The priest can't know it, but just by being there he probably saved my life and that little girl's. Wish I could tell him.

† † †

John Coaler.

Shit! I jerk awake. It's the Boss.

Florida is your destination.

What the fuck?

Florida is your destination.

Boss sounds weird — painfully loud. It's headache time again — but also really flat, toneless. Kind of like the Messengers that very first time. Is this a trick?

You are not misled. Florida is your destination. Bayonet Point.

You're not mad about the little girl?

Danger awaits.

You're in some kind of... trouble?

Florida is your destination.

And if I don't wanna?

Cripes! It's the maggots in my guts again, eating me alive, eating their way out.

There are two ways to serve.

Fuck, you made your point. How the hell am I supposed to get there, though?

Chad Neal. Wings are needed...

Real weird. It's his voice, but faint or distracted. Am I overhearing him? Is Chad Neal another one of his tools?

...prepare the way. Montgomery airport is the path G'AIHIEE!

Shit! Boss is screaming in my head! Gotta sight him out!

That's better. Cripes, what the hell *was* that? I've never heard the Boss like that before!

Like he could barely speak, and usually he's such a smartass. I don't know. It was almost like a dream, or when you've worked 20 hours at a stretch and can't

think words anymore but you can still work, you can almost work better — that weird glassy clarity. Was Boss sleepwalking? Was it a fakeout? Or is the smart-ass stuff a fakeout and he's really that way all the time?

Sounds like he needs my help. Wants me to fly somewhere from Montgomery and go to Bayonet Point. And do what? What can I do to something that can threaten a no-shit demon from hell?

† † †

John.

Boss?

Sorry about the confusion earlier.

What the hell happened? You still want me to go to Florida?

Yes, I think that's a good idea.

Someone I should kill?

Too late. The damage is mostly done. Nonetheless, I'd like you to look around at Tina Krebb's house. It could be educational for me... and for you.

This counts as my end of the bargain, then.

Oh, don't be ridiculous. You still owe me a kill, but circumstances have changed. You won't get an easy target like a young girl.

Good.

I'm still disappointed that you resisted me, John. It was a distraction. One of my enemies took advantage and got to Tina. So what happened to her is your fault. Remember that.

† † †

Krebbs' house is a bad scene. Not in the usual way — she ain't turned inside out or any shit like that. She's just crazy and sick and way too eager to please.

She's an old bag. Greets me at the door with fear in her eyes and blood running out of her nose. She doesn't even notice how fucked up I am, unlike every other asshole gawker between Florida and Alabama. When the boss freaked out, a bunch of blood vessels burst all over my head — eyes, ears, nose. I look like a bloodshot drunk with a sunburn.

Krebbs could care less. She asks if I'm John Coaler and when I say I am, she hands me a bank envelope. It's full of \$50s.

While I'm counting it, she scurries off to the bathroom and throws up. When she comes back, there's a little blood on her mouth.

"I didn't mean to betray Vassago. I love him."

I flinch. Dammit — I don't like hearing Boss' name out loud. She doesn't seem to care, though. She's babbling.

"I'll never do it again. Never again. Never ever again. Never ever ever."

Ten thousand bucks! It's a smaller bundle than you might think. But it looks like a hell of a lot when I put it in my wallet.

"The keys. The car keys. They're for you. They're on the kitchen table. Vassago said to give you the car keys. I love Vassago. And my jewels. You're supposed to have them... even my wedding ring. Vassago said so. I love him."

See what happens when you cross me, John?

What did you do to her?

Nothing complicated. I'm screaming in her head right now. Just like I have been for the past, hmmm, 48 hours. Plus I've been deathsucking her — the 'maggots in the belly' feeling you had earlier.

You're killing her then.

Oh no. I'll keep her balanced on the edge of death for years. I'll let her recover a bit — maybe even let her think I was a delusion and that she's cured. Then, when her soul has grown a bit stronger, I'll eat off another chunk. Same thing with the body. It's not as satisfying as draining her dry in one delicious gulp, but in the long run the total yield is much higher.

And that's what I can expect?

You're different. Your 'Messengers'... put something in you. Or gave back something they took away, long ago. They didn't think creatures like me would be able to go through the opening they made. But they probably didn't think you'd invite us in, either.

† † †

Tina had a crappy old station wagon, but it's a shitload better than nothing. Her jewels were pretty unimpressive. Worth about \$800 at the local pawnshop. So I'm sitting pretty, cash-wise. Boss told me it's time to head north, to Washington D.C. It's a haul — 17 hours, plus or minus. I do six in the afternoon, and the rest the day after. I don't even mind. It's relaxing. That night, I sleep in the back of the station wagon. I took some pillows from Tina after calling the nuthatch on her, and bought a real good sleeping bag at Target. Cozy. I even broke down and bought some barbecue ribs in Tennessee.

I got the sight on right now so that I can think about stuff. I'm hoping the Boss won't notice. He hasn't talked to me much, and when he has he's seemed kind of out of it again. Not real bad, but... distracted. So now may be my time to think.

Krebbs babbled a lot about her jewelry. Said something about an earring, that she'd protected it for years. Why just one? Wouldn't she say 'earrings'?

Also, back when I was with... with *her*, before I got loose.... When did I start to hear the Boss? Hard to remember, but I think it was after that cunt with the diamond necklace. It's pretty hazy... don't *want* to remember... but yeah. In fact, I think that fucking necklace was touching me the first time he spoke.

So there's some kind of connection to jewelry. And Krebbs didn't have her earring anymore. Maybe this enemy of the Boss' stole it or broke it? Hell, I can't figure this shit out.

Well, at least I ain't on that damn list anymore. If I posted it there I'd have more bullshit conjecture than I'd know what to do with.

† † †

The guy who meets me in D.C. is another old fucker. Looks like he dodged the draft in the War of 1812. Boss gave me directions to his door. Pretty nice place, out in Georgetown.

"So you're the... specialist... that our 'mutual friend' has sent?"

Screw the backward talk. "I'm John Coaler, if that's what you're asking. Can I come in?"

"Certainly, certainly. I'm Doctor Miles Fiske. I'm just glad you arrived here in time, while the..." he stops suddenly and flinches. Gets a frightened look on his face. "Uh, never mind."

"Boss talkin' at you?"

"No, not at all." He looks away. "Can I get you, erm..."

While his back's turned, I give him a good hard smack on the back of the head. Open hand, nothing really to it. Not even enough to bruise, but he stumbles forward and bounces off a wall.

"Don't lie, okay?"

He gives me this look. It's equal parts scared and pissed off and disgusted, like his own turd jumped out of the toilet and bit him. I just laugh.

Leave him alone, John. He's on our side.

Your side, you mean.

He's a millionaire, John. He could fix you up, if you let him.

"Look, Fiske, Boss says you need someone killed, and I'm the man for the job, but don't think you can yank my chain, all right?"

"I don't... it's not that I need an... an assassin."

"What do you need then? And no bullshit."

He gets that creeped-out, twitchy look again. Chews his lip and wipes his face. Must be hearing from the Boss.

"Very well," he says, "please come with me."

We go from one room full of books and antiques into another room full of books and antiques, and he pulls at the corner of a bookshelf. It rolls forward, revealing a safe with all kinds of electronic doodads. I know a transistor from a capacitor, but I got no idea what this stuff is until he sticks a finger in a little cuff. Then he looks into an attached pair of lenses, like binoculars.

Some online dinks talked about this kind of shit. Fingerprints and retinal scanners. Shit to keep your goodies safe. Once he's turned them off, he dials the combination and pulls out the fanciest motherfucking necklace I've ever seen.

"Is that real?"

"An interesting question," he says, with a little bit of a smirk. Oh great. He's *smart*. "The diamonds are real diamonds, procured at great cost to our mutual patron. The central blue diamond is close to 45 carats and has boron traces that flare red in ultraviolet light. In that sense, it's 'real.' But it wasn't mined in Golconda, India and it does not contain the greater part of the soul of Vassago the Demon Prince."

I just look at him for a moment. "Huh?"

He rolls his eyes and I'd sure like to smack him again. He can probably tell because he says, "Never mind. This is a replica of another necklace, made with real gems. I just need to swap out the other with this one."

"Because the other necklace has the Boss in it?"

"Part of him."

I shrug. "What do you need my help for? I'm no fuckin' burglar."

"I don't anticipate problems with the exchange," he says, but he looks jumpy. I'm guessing that he's been creeping toward this for years and Boss suddenly pushed up the schedule after Krebbs. "You see, I'm the curator at Annenberg Hooker Hall — that's where the real diamond is displayed. You're simply here to—"

GO NOW!

Both of us flinch at the same time. Boss sounds pissed. And scared.

† † †

John, all I need you to do is keep Miles from dying until a little after sundown. He's taking you to the Smithsonian now.... Miles, hit the gas!

Again, the overhearing... and Miles jams his Bentley through a red light. Honks. Screeches. He just about creams some poor bicycle courier.

Leave the gun here. It won't help.

We park illegally and Miles puffs like a steam engine running through the Mall to the door. I can keep up easily and don't see any point in getting ahead of him.

There's a woman behind a counter. She looks kind of alarmed at him as he gasps at her. "Visitor... here... need a... badge." He's turned real pale — his lips are almost blue. He's pointing at me.

"What sort of...?"

"Geologist!" He flinches, and in my mind I hear an echo of the Boss telling him to leave me. "Gotta go!" He stumbles off toward the stairs.

I look at her and shrug. "I'll join him in a minute."

"Is he all right?"

"I think he needs to find a cra... uh, a toilet."

She giggles, looks embarrassed, then asks for my name. At that moment, the loudspeaker comes on and a cultured voice says that the museum will be closing in five minutes.

Stick around, John. I think he's coming through the front door.

Who? Should I put on the sight?

You won't need the sight.

That doesn't sound promising.

I hang back by the mammoth under the open balcony thing, watching the front door as people file out. I take off my coat and hang it over my arm.

Look, Boss, if this guy doesn't show up, does that count as—

He'll show.

"The museum is now closed," says the loudspeaker again. I should be relaxed. I mean, this place must have security up the yin-yang, and for once I'm on the good side of it. But instead, I'm getting more nervous.

"Excuse me, sir..." I hear from a guard down by the doors.

That's him.

He's a little guy, skinny, black as an eight ball and just as bald. How much time is Fiske gonna need?

Just hold him off for a minute, John.

That counts as my next kill for you?

Sure, if you survive.

The black guy pretty much ignores the two guards at the door, walking right past 'em into the museum. They don't care much for that. One grabs his shoulder, the other reaches for something on his gear belt.

Holy shit!

I ain't sure what baldy just did — some fuckin' Bruce Lee move, and all of a sudden the two guards are down.



He's holding... what's he holding? Looks like a pool cue with a knife on the end, only it's... it's not really there... it just popped in from nowhere, like a shadow.

Watch out, John. That's a releasing tool.

A what?

It cuts souls from bodies.

He's coming right at me. I throw my coat at him and lunge hard to my left.

John! Don't let him get past you!

"Back off!" I shout, and I use the blowback on him.

Works perfectly. He gets a surprised look and flies back like he's on a wire. Is the angle...? Yes! Right into the goddamn cloakroom.

I can feel him testing the wall. Good luck. I just need to get somewhere he can't shoot at me with a gun — behind the mammoth, maybe.

"What's going on here?"

Three more rent-a-cops, coming down the stairs. They look at the fallen guards by the front door.

"I dunno! Some guy did something to those guys, and now he's in the, uh, the coat check!"

They huddle, mutter, then break toward the door where the guy's hiding. So far, so good. He's

stuck, he's got them to deal with. How much longer on Miles?

He's run into some trouble.

Shit! He's coming through!

The black dude comes out of the coatroom and he's changed. He looks seven feet tall and he's covered in shadows and a kind of dim red fire, like the angry red you get when a campfire's almost done. He glows along the edges and joints and at the tips of his ragged, shadowy wings.

The guards open fire and I yell, "Vassago!"

The three rubber gunners are floored by the time I've changed.

You have to distract him! Stop him, or he'll just fly up to Miles and kill him!

"Hey! C'mere, ya big fuck!" I can't think of anything better, but I use the angel-lure edge on him and it at least gets his attention.

Let me talk to him.

"Usiel! Most potent of Slayers and most despised!"

I didn't know the Boss could talk out my throat. It stops the shadow monster. He looks pissed and points his reaping stick at me.

"I WAS NEVER CURSED WITH THAT TITLE, FIEND. I NEVER MIRED MYSELF IN THE FILTH OF BETRAYAL."

He's a little closer.

"And yet you were condemned nonetheless. Do you think you can survive long — crushed between the rage of Hell and the scorn of Heaven?"

"IN DESTROYING YOU, I SHALL DO HEAVEN'S WORK!"

I know lines like that. That's the kind of shit you say before the hitting starts. Sure enough, he lunges in and swings his stick, propelling himself with his wings. But I'm ready. He's not the only one with wings.

Doesn't matter if it's a pool cue or a 'releasing tool,' you've got to get close so it has no swing. I manage to get my hands on the shaft before he can cut me. Cripes, the thing's like ice! My hands go numb just touching it.

His wings enclose me and I feel sick, dizzy, faint, but I slide one hand down to his, where he's gripping the stick. I don't use the devil hooks, I use the angel mark.

"Burn, you fucker!"

He screams — anger as much as pain — and shoves me back, hard. I can see the mark sinking into his hand. It's one I ain't seen before, the symbol sinks right through him. His fingers, flame and shadow, break off and fall to the floor.

He swings the stick one-handed and I duck, but I feel that icy numbness slice my wings, wings that aren't really mine...

... and for a moment, I'm back on the boat, the rain sleeting down as wolf claws rake my legs.

Miles has it! He's out! Get away, John!

"Back!" I shout again, and again he's flung away, but he gets off a final swing as he goes. It's right across my chest, a chill that steals my breath...

... and I'm with one of Annabelle's 'guests,' on all fours and crying with shame, weeping with joy. He's behind me with his fangs in my neck. He's taking so much. I can feel myself dying and it's all worth it....

When I look down, the blood is frozen on the clean edges of the slice.

I stumble back and fall on my ass. I gotta go. One more hit from that thing and I'm dead. I grab my coat, turn toward the entrance and go at it hard. I give one good sweep with my wings for speed before letting them fade away. I can see flashing lights out the front and I pull on my coat, hiding the ripped-out back of my shirt. My front is covered with blood. I put my hands up and scream, "Don't shoot!" as I stumble out in front of a good 20 cops.

Shit, what was that thing?

That was the Reaper of Souls.

† † †

I'm coming up on Cincinnati. Getting out of D.C. was a pain, but not too bad. When they saw the gash on my chest, they took me to the hospital. I babbled out some story about a black guy with a big knife. The guards eventually recovered and the press put out some story about sleeping gas, a lone nut with a knife in the Smithsonian, blah blah blah bullshit.

I snuck out of the hospital much earlier than they thought I could — that fuckin' death stick cut an inch deep into my chest. Any deeper and it would have gone through my heart. But having been in the Boss' shape and using the angel health thing fixed me up enough, so they weren't expecting me to even be awake, let alone mobile.

Now I'm going to Cincinnati to waste a fang.

You know what you should do, John?

What should I do, Boss?

You should use that lure thing, let her get you back to her place, start fucking her and then — bang! — put on the monster body.

Oh, come on.

What? You know you want to.

I do not want to hump some dead thing.

Johnny, you can't fool me. There's nothing you want more than to kill a vampire by screwing her.

No!

Why not?

It's not about... that. I just want the evil fuckers gone, that's all.

You don't believe that, and neither do I. If you did, you'd stay in one place and clean it out.

I tried that. It just got more attention.

How come you're never so fired up to kill the ugly ones then?

You never lead me to ugly ones.

You wrong me. I have no interest in which vampires you kill, but I make an effort to give you victims you'll enjoy. Can you deny that?

I know what you're trying to do. You want to mix up sex and violence in my head.

John, it's way too late for that.

I'm not putting my dick in another dead thing. That's final.

† † †

With the Boss being all pissy, I have to find another way. He leads me through Cincinnati and I see her —

a redhead this time. Tight vinyl pants and biker boots. Shiny red shirt that looks spray-painted onto a truly amazing rack.

You can't take her in a straight fight, John. Not unless you get the drop on her. A lot of fangs don't give a damn about sex, but she's one of the few who's nostalgic. And she won't put on the bite until after, until she's reminded herself that she can't really come anymore. Gee, who does that sound like?

I ignore him, because I've seen something else. It's a poster for the band playing at a coffee bar. The band is called "The Shakes" and right in the middle of it is a pumped-full angel tag. 'Revenge.' Could be just what I need.

I go inside.

The Shakes really suck. They're doing a cover of "Master of Puppets" with a lot more volume than talent. They should be ashamed. I can see why they're playing in a coffee bar — the oldest looking one can't be more than 18. He's trying to grow a beard and it's all thin and patchy.

I get a cup of tea, light up a smoke, write an angel stick-figure on a napkin and wait for the noise to stop. When they start saying their goodnights, I flick on the sight. Dunno if that'll hide Boss from 'em or not, or if they're even smart enough to check me out. If they're typical, once they see the stick-figure they won't bother with the sight on me. They'll be too glad to find a 'kindred spirit.'

"Scuse me." I tap the guitarist on the shoulder. He turns and gives me a look.

"You draw the poster?"

"Naw, that was Steve." He turns away. I put a hand on his shoulder and turn him back.

"Steve?"

He tries to shrug out of my grip, but can't. Jerks his thumb at the drummer.

"Thanks."

He mutters 'asshole' at me, but there's too many people around to take him to school. Besides, he's just some jerk-ass kid.

"Steve?"

He turns. I show him the napkin. His face lights up. Typical.

† † †

"It was us two, plus Deke and Drifter," Steve says.

I'm with Steve and the bassist from the Shakes, a guy named Robbie. Robbie looks about 15. Steve lives in a converted apartment over his parents' garage.

We're drinking cheap beer and passing around some really weak pot. I tell them my name is Sean Bowler.

Sounds like they had the typical conversion experience. Saw something ugly. Freaked out. Whaled on it. Half of 'em died taking it down.

Steve's going into loving detail. I'm kind of tuning him out. Heard this story too many times. Read it over and over on the Internet.

"Lucky I had a shotgun in the truck," he says.

"You hunt?"

"Yeah. Deer, pheasant, wild turkey... that kinda stuff."

"Man, I could really go for some venison sausage. I used to hunt that shit up in Washington State."

"I think we got some! Robbie, go see if there's any deer sausage down in the freezer."

Robbie's just looking at my hand as I take the bong from him. "How'd you lose the finger? Was it, like, a monster?"

"Yep." Actually it was a fishhook, but I'm not about to tell Beavis and Butthead that story.

"Robbie? The sausage? Like, today?" The kid scuttles off.

"So, Sean. How come you're in Cincinnati?" Steve asks. I'm ready for it.

"I was in New York and I wasted this fang bitch named Amy. She had a letter in her purse from another one here named Marisol Vlacek." I got the name from the Boss.

"A... 'fang'?"

Cripes. "A vampire, Steve. Yes, they're real."

Robbie's back with the sausage and I start drooling as I cook it up. "Man, it's been a while. Usually I don't eat meat."

"Huh?" Robbie looks at me like I said, "Usually I don't breathe air."

"I got the wakeup in Seattle, along with some of my buddies. One of 'em was working in a canning plant, gutting fish. He spotted a dead thing working on the cold floor. A no-shit, walking dead, rotted out zombie packing fish! I mean, who knows what he was oozing into 'em, you know? Since that time, I've stayed away from processed meats."

"Gross."

"Uh huh." I take another bong hit and cough. Harsh, shitty weed.

"We don't get much action out here," Steve says. He actually sounds wistful.

"Have you looked?"

"Yeah!"

"How?"

"Whenever we do a show! We always make sure to scan the audience."

I just laugh. "Yeah, 'cause the fuckin' evil dead got nothing better to do than hang out in milk bars listening to garage bands."

"Hey! We're not—"

"Look, vampires want victims. People who won't be missed. They're not going to go somewhere warm and friendly. They're looking for drifters, hookers, bums. Or the bolder ones, the stuck-up bitches who think they're too good for that shit... they're after the unattached, unmarried types. The bar crawlers, make-out artists and one-night-standers. You know? Someone they can pick up, fuck, suck and dump without worrying about a wife or mommy calling the cops right away. Someone without a lot of close friends. Someone they can get their hooks into and gradually take over all the way."

John, you're burning your sausage.

"Shit." I pull it off the fire and wait for it to cool. It's still delicious.

† † †

I gab at the yokels for a while, then get a hotel room and crash. I spend the next day just resting, ordering room service, watching cable, and putting the laser sight and the silencer on Miller's gun. Damn, it feels good to have some money! Now it's Saturday afternoon. We're in my room smoking more weed before going out to find Marisol. I don't figure it's going to impair me at all, not the shitty stuff they've got. It'll just take the edge off.

I'm feeling pretty good, so I tell Robbie the truth about my finger.

"Yeah, I was shittin' you about the monster. I was out on a fishing boat, sticking chum on a line. Fuckin' hook went right in my finger, right about the first knuckle, and tore the whole thing off. But I was lucky."

"How you figure?"

"Shit, if it went through my hand or arm, the line could've dragged me right off the boat. It's not that uncommon. Guys die like that all the time. One minute you're bored out of your skull baiting hooks, the next you're 50 feet behind the boat and 20 feet under being dragged by a hook in your flesh."

"So didja have to go in?"

I shrug. "What for? The finger was at the bottom of the sea. Guy on board sewed up the stump, we banded it up good and I kept working."

"No way!"

"I'm not kidding! Shit, it was the start of a trip! No way were they going to turn around and head back just for a little cut. It'd be like throwing 20 grand down the toilet. MedEvac isn't going to fly out for something that minor. Besides, if we'd gone in, I'da had to *pay* a doctor to do the same thing they did on the boat, and I'd have lost my share of the take. And no one would hire me on after that, if word got out how I'd pussied out." I know I'm starting to ramble, but I don't give a shit. I pull up a pant leg to show them the seven-inch scar there. "Now, for *that* I got airlifted."

"Holy shit!"

"Swordfish'll carve you good. Plus, it got infected. Swordfish cuts always do. I figured that would be my last trip. The money was good, but come on. To put up with that for long, you gotta really love the sea, and I don't. I stopped fishing, got work at a yard doing welding and engines, some electrical stuff — general rigging work. But I wound up on a fishing boat again eventually."

"So, you don't have *any* scars from monsters?" The little drip sounds disappointed.

"Nah. I've been carved up plenty bad, but now I heal scarless. Weird, huh?"

"Hmph." Steven sounds unconvinced. Screw him.

"So, you got an address for this vampire we're after?" he asks.

"I do, but do you really want to go after her in her house at night? That's stacking dumb on stupid."

"Oh yeah?"

"Look, house kills can work — if you go in during the day and know what you're doing. You can get 'em while they're groggy and confused and you can let the sunlight do your work. But at night? A wide-awake vampire is tough enough without being on its own turf. Usually, a vampire wants to protect her house, too — armed guards, tripwires. Hell, some of 'em pump their houses full of shit like sarin gas. It doesn't hurt them, they don't need to breathe."

"Sounds like someone's kinda scared."

This little pecker's killing my buzz.

"You're not?" I ask.

"Heh, like, 'I ain't 'fraid of no ghosts and shit,'" Robbie snickers. Steve ignores him.

"Shit, no. Vampires — I'll just put one in the heart with my crossbow. Stake through the heart kills 'em, right?" He points a finger at me like a gun. "Pow."

"It ain't that easy," I say.

"C'mon, Bowler. How many 'fangs' you *really* killed?"
 "Plenty."

"Sure, but they didn't leave any scars when they hurt you. That's kinda convenient."

I'm up and he has about enough time to drop his jaw and look stupid before I get him by the collar of his fake leather jacket. Skinny-ass punk is light enough that I can lift him one-handed and pin him against the wall.

"Leggo!"

I give him a slap. Robbie says, "Hey," gets up and looks uncertain. Fuckin' amateurs. I pull the gun out and fix the red dot on Robbie's chest.

"Bang. You're dead." I stick the barrel up under Steve's chin. "You, too. Say 'hi' to God for me."

I step back, let him drop and lower the pistol.

"I ain't as fast as a vampire, and I ain't as strong, and you two assholes ain't got shit on me. The gun scare you? Lots of vampires don't *need* them. Maybe you're not completely worthless, 'cause you at least got the call, but don't think it's gonna be easy and don't think it's gonna be fun. Now, who votes to do it my way?"

† † †

Cripes, but she's pretty.

Marisol Vlacek owns a gallery — not like a museum kind of place, but one full of that weird-ass modern shit. The kind of place for people who wear black turtlenecks and sip wine and go to the 'cinema' instead of the movies. A place for phonies. Perfect spot for a goddamn fang.

We sniffed around before sundown, but any one of us would have stuck out like a sore thumb inside. So, I got Steve some clothes that were faggoty enough to fit in and told him to go in with his mouth shut and eyes open.

Now I'm at a bar across the street, nursing a brew. Robbie's at the bookstore next door. Steve went inside maybe 10 minutes ago.

The bar windows are frosted and fancied up, but I can peek out the edges. The gallery has big picture windows with weird paintings in 'em — shit with hair and fur and bits of leather glued on. Between the paintings, you got the fakes wandering around gassing, Marisol cruising between 'em in a slinky green dress.

It matches her eyes, you know.

I don't give a shit.

Red hair and green eyes are supposedly the combination most favored by the Devil.

I catch a glimpse of Steve between the paintings. He's by himself, looking around, looking lost. Poor bastard. Just don't draw attention to yourself, kid. Play it cool. Take it easy.

What's that dumb fucker doing?

Cripes, he's in there 10 minutes and someone's giving him the hairy eyeball. Someone *big*.

That's Edouard Manoglio, one of Marisol's blood slaves.

Steve's losing his shit. Aw, dammit, he's yelling and pointing and people are starting to stare. Steve, don't say it. Don't do it, Steve. She still might think you're just a standard asshole and kick you out...

Now Robbie's standing in front of the window, blocking my view, gesturing for me to come out. I jerk my head for him to move, but he doesn't get it. Moron.

And here comes a cop car. Wow, that's some rapid response. Suspiciously quick.

He's a slave, too.

Robbie looks from me to the gallery. Shit. He wants to go fuck with the cop. I'm out of my seat, and he waits for me to join him in front of the bar. For once, his indecisiveness is a good thing.

"They've got him, Sean!"

"No foolin'?' You think we should go over and get arrested, too?"

"But... we can't just let her..."

"Look close at that cop. You see anything weird?"

He screws up his eyes. "No?"

Suddenly I got a bad feeling. "Come back in here." I drag him into the bookstore and write a symbol — the new one from D.C., the one that means 'demon.' Any hunter would recognize it.

"Uh... it means... uh..."

"How about this one?" I just draw some bullshit. He looks at me, helplessly.

"Shit, you never got the call at all, did you? Did you? You lying little punk?"

"Sir?" It's some timid librarian type. I haul Robbie out of the store. The squad car's gone, with Steve in tow.

The cop's going to drive him out behind a warehouse near the police station and hand him over to Edouard.

Can we nab him?

Not without the cop calling in a bunch of backup.

What does Edouard do with him?

Most likely takes him back to the gallery.

"Sean? Sean!" It's Robbie.

"What?"

"What do we do now?"

"I'm thinkin'.... Look, if they take him to the police station, it's gonna be a — I dunno — a drunken

disorderly kinda thing. Disturbing the peace or some bullshit. He'll get the drunk tank and community service. No big deal. What we gotta worry about is if they take him somewhere and shake him down."

"Steve would never say nothin'!"

"He wouldn't want to but... listen, they got ways, y'know? But we've got time." I look through the window. Bitch is still strolling around, laughing about the guy who just called her a vampire. Does she look a little distracted? Hard to tell.

"Nothing too big is going to happen while she's at her party. When she kicks people out, she'll go question him — if he's not in jail. We'll assume he's not — worst-case scenario, y'know?" I pull him toward the car.

We drive to where Steve parked to get the shotgun from the trunk, but of course Robbie doesn't have a key so we have to smash a window and fold down the back seat. Then it's off to my hotel to get the stuff from my room. If I have to disappear, I don't want to leave anything behind. Finally, we fill up the tank on the station wagon, stop to siphon some gas into bottles, and then fill the tank again.

"Here's the plan, Robbie. You ain't goin' up against no vampire, not without even the basic shit you need against them. Your job is to get into the gallery through the front door, find Steve, and haul ass out the back. I'll be parked there, an' I'll leave the doors unlocked."

"But... what if they're in there when I go in?"

"That's what the gasoline's for, to make sure they ain't. You're going to hit the door with a gas bomb, got it? Aim high. Then you have to smash in a window, or shoot it out with the shotgun, and get inside that way. Can you do that?"

He nods, but he's just a friggin' kid. It could happen, I suppose.

"When you're inside, look for Steve. Don't call out! If you see anyone moving around, throw a gas bomb. When you're out of bombs, start shooting."

† † †

It ain't a great plan, but I only need Robbie to get as far as lighting that first Molotov. Anything past that is gravy. I get to the back of the gallery with my own gun and wait, aiming it at the door.

You know, if you really want her dead, I can tell you the names of some local vampires who would happily kill her.

I'm ignoring you.

Now that you've given them a pretext, that is. Steve would snuff it, of course, but you must know that he almost certainly will in any event.

Ignoring you....

But you need that personal touch, don't you? You need to be the one who kills her. So much for 'I just want the evil fuckers gone.'

I hear a commotion from the front. That must be Robbie. As predicted, the nasties come out the back. Edouard first. I pop him one right in the center. Sweet. He falls, gets up and scrambles toward her car. So loyal. It's touching, really.

"Vassago!"

She comes out, poison green and gorgeous, but limping. I sweep down on her like night. She moves faster than a cat, but I know where she's going. She isn't even as tough as Amy, after all. I just enfold her in my wings and tear her to ribbons.

I finish in time to see Edouard tearing out of the parking lot without her. Maybe not so loyal.

"Sean!"

I drop her and turn. I let the monster body go, too, 'cause it's Robbie's voice.

"Sean! You gotta help me!"

Holy crap, the little bastard's found Steve! Didn't save him, though. I can see from here that Steve's open from neck to nuts. Guess he gave the bitch that limp. Robbie's in shock, he's hysterical. I've seen people freak out like this before. He's dragging his buddy out and, damn, Robbie's fucked up, too. Don't know who got him, or what, or how, but he looks gutted.

I get to him just as he collapses under Steve's weight.

"Help me, Sean. Help me, help me...."

The boy's gonna die.

Tell him my name.

What?

Teach him my name! If I take him as a vassal, I can save him.

I look down at the pleading kid. Poor little fuck.

"Sorry," I say.

Then I'm outta there.

† † †

I'm in Chicago. For my money, it ain't been the same since M.J. left the Bulls, but I did get a good deep-dish downtown. Now I'm in some candyass suburb at a (no-foolin') craft fair, because Boss said that's where I'd find my next imbued. Boss has been

heckling me all day. His voice is like putting your hand in a garbage disposal.

I think I've got your ethics pegged, John.

That's swell.

You drew the line at the girl. And Robbie.

Why do you care?

Eh, I might as well tell you the truth: I want to hollow out your soul. I want to rid you completely of all moral remorse. When I've done that, 'John Coaler' will effectively cease to exist and I'll capture your immortal essence for my personal use.

Yadda yadda yadda. Good luck on that one, Darth.

Don't think I can do it?

I think I'm tougher than you know.

Pride before the fall, Johnny.

Maybe I'll just kill myself before you can do that. After all, there's part of you in me, right? If I kack myself, everything you've invested in me goes down the crapper.

I don't think you'll kill yourself.

I turn a corner and there it is. A little booth like all the other little booths, full of handmade wreaths and knit mittens and all kinds of kitten-pinecone-artsy-crap. This one's full of bowls and cups, only they've all been made with hunter signs.

Shit, I get it. Potter116! The drippiest of the drips. Cripes, I figured her tag was a last name or something.

And fuck, she's looking right at me and I'm off-sight!

She ain't much to see — chunky and saggy, with her hair in a dyke-chop. She's wearing some kind of African print shirt and a rope of beads long enough to moor a schooner. Her face just got pale and her jaw dropped, like she's seen a ghost — or something worse.

She must be sighting me. I have to wonder what I look like.

She comes right out from behind her little table and asks, "What afflicts you?"

I can't look at her. Can't take it.

Why don't you just tell her?

I can't but whisper, "I'm possessed."

† † †

Jesus Christ, this is too easy. I don't know why I never did this before. You go up to one of the wussbags and tell 'em you're a hunter. They look at you funny, wondering if you're a cold-ass killer or if you're on their side. It's like a, a whatchacallit...

Litmus test.

Yeah, to see if your ideas match theirs. And if they don't — if you wanna actually *kill monsters* or something — they get all huffy-puffy and snooty and stuck-up. But if you *are* a monster, well shit, they let you in with open arms.

Leaf — that's her name. Damn, how granola is that? She closed down her display. Packed it all up to help me. If that's how she runs her business, she must be hurtin' pretty bad. But anyway, she packed it all in her car and drove me to some organic restaurant. I think she liked it when I ordered a vegetarian meal. What a sap.

Now she's giving me the big brown eyes look and wants to know what happened to me.

Watch out, John. She's trying to trick you — trying to make you submissive and docile.

Still, I gotta tell her something.

"Well, I... I used to live out West, in Seattle. Worked on boats, you know. Fixing radios an' motors an' stuff." I scratch my head. "And I started hearing this voice. In my head."

"What sort of voice?"

"A man's voice. Tellin' me to do stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"At first, not so bad. You know, just, uh... a little stealing. There was this woman with a diamond necklace—"

Don't tell her about that! You idiot!

I feel a twinge in my gut, and I shift. "Little things. You know. Stuff I might have done anyway before, only I didn't have the nerve."

"It doesn't take courage to do evil," she says. Sunday-school teacher voice. She tilts her head. It's funny, sitting down, in this light. She's almost all-right looking. Not gorgeous, but, you know, not bad.

Not that you could do anything about it, could you John? Not even if she begged you....

"Did the voice promise you anything?" Again with the doe-eye stare.

"Uh... yeah."

"What?"

Power. Freedom. Revenge.

"He... uh... told me he could get me money."

Cripes, why am I lying to her? Suddenly, this all seems so fake. All of it, going around the country, doing these, these motherfuckin' *missions* for the Boss... it's crazy. I didn't want this. I just wanted to be left alone! Just to, to *get by*, to not have to worry so much about my next rent check. I never asked to see werewolves and

vampires, never asked some angel to pump me full of bullshit and hang me out like a piñata. That's it, that's what I am, what we all are. We're full of angel shit, and when the critters beat on us long enough, we burst open and splatter them.

I suddenly want to trust her and tell her all this, tell her what I've done and how *tired* I am.

John, that's her fucking with you! Wake up, dammit! Remember how the snivelers always talked about creatures having a 'moment of truth'? You think that just happens? It's an angel trick! She's using it on you right now! You feel tired because she wants you to. She wants you to give up and cry and tell mama all about it. She wants you to put your head on her shoulder and surrender. Are you gonna? Are you gonna surrender to another woman?

I grit my teeth. He's right. Or maybe he's playing me, I don't know. All I do know is I'm mad now.

"Was it just money?"

"Yeah. And he did it. Only he cheated."

"Cheated how?"

"I had the money for a while, but, uh... I lost it."

"Lost it how?"

Hang your head and tell her 'gambling'.

"Gambling."

She gives my hand a sympathetic pat. "Was that why you needed money in the first place?"

"Yeah." I do my best to look ashamed. It's not easy 'cause I'm actually getting more and more pissed.

Think of Annabelle. Or better yet, her black buddy, the one with the big thick cock....

I can feel myself flush. I bite my lip. That's a dirty trick, Boss.

It works, though. I pile it on while I'm ahead.

"I can't... I mean, I tried to quit, but... and now he's telling me he can get me more money, but I gotta do more stuff. Worse stuff." I look away from her and whisper. "He wanted me to hurt a little girl."

Her hand tightens on mine. "Did you?" Her voice is urgent, afraid.

"No. I fought back. But it was hard." Holy crap, I'm actually crying. "He was angry. He hurt me real bad."

"You have to resist him, John."

Cripes, why did I tell her my real name? I just couldn't think of another one fast enough. Shoulda used Ron or Sean or Don again.

Then it's like the temperature drops. I glance at her and she's looking away, off to the left. I look that way and there's a guy. Not real tall, but solid. A little

chubby, but this is a guy who's done work. Sandy-brown hair, a little beard. Looks like he could take a punch and maybe throw one back.

Leaf stands up. "Excuse me." Her voice is suddenly hard. She goes over to the guy. I turn my ear toward 'em and catch her saying, "Unless you've got the papers signed, I don't want to see you."

He says something back, something low. I watch their reflections in the back of my spoon. He looks nervous. She looks pissed. They lower their voices, gesture, shake heads. I see him point at me and he looks... what, jealous? Not happy, that's for damn sure.

When he puts his hand on her arm and she swats it off, I decide that's my cue.

"This guy bothering you?"

She's flushed. Her mouth's flat but she's trying to play it dignified. "Nothing he does bothers me. He's beneath my notice." Ouch.

"I'm her ex-husband," the guy says.

"Well, I don' wanna butt in—"

"Then don't," he says.

"It sounds like she doesn't want to talk to you."

He turns on me and leans in. "Look. You may have fooled her, but you haven't fooled me."

"Why don't you back off?" I try to say it nice.

"No, why don't you back off?"

Bam! Next thing I know, I'm stumbling away. My back slams into the edge of a table. I almost fall.

Bastard used blowback on me!

"Leave him alone!" she yells, standing between us.

"Leaf, he—"

"At least he didn't hurt a child," she says.

Everyone in the restaurant is looking at him. Ex-hubby turns bright red and stumbles toward the door. He turns back once, like he wants to have a parting shot, but he can't think of anything to say.

† † †

Now I'm in her apartment. All I have to do is tell her I've been sleeping in my car and she's offering to let me use her shower. Is this some kind of trap or is she really this trusting?

Boss is quiet. He just told me to ask her what she meant about her husband hurting the child, which I did. It was on the ride over here, and she looked away, really angry or sad. But she didn't want to talk about it. Can't figure her out, and the Boss is playing his own damn game. Typical.

"Ain't you, like... nervous?" I ask her. I gotta know.

"The Living Power protects me," she says. Just like that. La la la.

"Must be nice."

"It is. But it's also an awesome responsibility. I've been given a lot, but I'm expected to do a lot with it."

Like it's that simple.

Maybe for her, it is.

What are you talking about?

Maybe the 'Messengers' like ditzzy morons who've never had to deal with life's shit. Maybe the gullible peaceniks get the lion's share of the protection, while you soldier types get in one good attack before you're used up. Like Steve. Kill one and die. You're hand grenades — dangerous but expendable. Witness and Potter, on the other hand, inherit the Earth because they're docile optimists that the angels can push around.

"John? Are you ready to start?"

"Start what?"

"I know you came here to... get clean," she says. "I think we both know you want that for more than just your body."

Don't let her do it, John.

What'll happen?

Just don't.

"I think I can free you from your... your rider," she says. "If you'll let me."

"What do I have to do?"

Remember the deal, John.

Quiet, you. Someone scaring you?

I almost put on the sight, but I can't quite bring myself to do it. What if he's right and she's tricking me? Or what if she's sincere but the Messengers are using her?

"Hold these," she says, giving me two big chunks of quartz crystal. "And put this on." It's like a necklace with a bunch of different rocks hanging from it. She fusses over it, getting them in just the right place. Then a headband with a rock on it. Cripes.

Don't let her, John. You won't like it.

"Sit here." She puts me in a chair and seats herself facing me.

She wanted you off the list. Remember all the shit she posted about you? You think she'd be giving you this 'spirit cleansing' crap if she knew who you really are?

"Try to relax. Just close your eyes and visualize all that negative energy draining out."

Where was she when you needed her? Where was she when you were helpless and alone? She was helping out the dead things, that's where she was!

She closes her eyes and I slam the right-hand rock into her head as hard as I can. She drops right out the chair. Before she can recover, I get on top of her and pin her down.

"Why... wha...?" She's bleeding from her temple, dazed and confused.

"I told you a buncha bullshit about the voice. I heard him, all right. But it wasn't for something simple like money. What he offered was my freedom. Before him, I was stuck. A vampire had me. You know all about them, right? You've probably had all kinds of chats with them, sitting around, trying to *understand* them, trying to see their point of view!"

"John, just let me up. We can talk—"

"Talk? Yeah, you love to *talk*, don't you? Love to post on hunter-net. All your theories. All your pretty ideas about how they're just misunderstood. They just need *love* and *caring*."

"You know about—?"

"About hunter-net? Bitch, I was *Rigger*! Yeah! Remember me *now*?" She looks scared, so I guess she fucking does.

"Whatever happened to you, I can help. I can help you get past it, please! Let me help!"

"It's a little late for that, don't you think? Where was your *help* when I got kicked off the list? When the werewolves came for me on the boat? When that *bitch* Annabelle wanted to know what kind of man could survive that shit, when she fucking *captured* me. Where were all my 'fellow imbued' then, huh?"

Something's thumping, but I don't care. Maybe just my heart.

"Whatever she did to you... whatever she put in you...."

"She made me eat crap! She passed me around to all her pals. I did it all. She made me suck their cocks! Whaddaya think about that? I was her dog. I wore a collar and crawled. I got on all fours and I begged, begged to eat out her dead cunt. You think you can make that better? Huh?"

"John, please...."

"That's love. That's understanding. She taught me good — I understand fang love better than any man alive!"

"So you gave away your soul."

"Hah! The Boss, he gave me my soul *back*. And you know what? I was happy. With Annabelle, with the bitch fang, I was *happy*. At least she *protected* me. More

than the Messengers ever did. More than you fuckers on the list ever did!"

Someone's yelling, but I don't...

"We never meant..."

"You *did*! You abandoned me and you were glad I was gone! Well, you're never gonna let *anyone* down again!"

The door splinters. Me and her both look up as a hand reaches through and opens it. It's her goddamn ex-husband and he's got a gun!

"Oaken!" she screams. I'm drawing my piece but it's too late.

"Don't!" she shouts.

Shit, his gun jams! Mine doesn't. He's gutshot. He screams, she screams. Bitch is gonna get the cops on me if I don't shut her up. I point the gun down at her face.

"Back...." he says.

Dammit!

Her ex- still has a good blowback in him! Now I'm 10 feet away from her. She's stumbling up and *hisses* at me. God! Hurts! Feels like... like she's pulling the Boss out of me by the roots, like he's my skeleton and she's trying to drag him through my skin!

"Vassago!" I don't know if I want his help, or to help him. The ex- is raising his piece again but I beat him to it. This time I hit his head and that should do it for him.

"You..." I try to speak, but suddenly the Boss is talking through me.

"Leaf! Speak my name!"

What the fuck? I aim at her and she just screams at me. Shit! Can't fire!

"I need your help! Please! I was desperate to find you!"

"He's lying to you!" Boss is trying to control my mouth. We're fighting over words.

"Fuck you!" she shrieks.

"I need the strength of the Living Power! Invoke my name and I can save you from Rigger!"

"Don't believe him!" It's like trying to talk while gargling marbles, but I get it out. I try to shoot her, but with the monster body and the hooks in my palms, I drop the gun. She's scrambling on all fours, heading for the door.

"Leaf, call my name! Invite me in! I beg you, you are my only chance for salvation!"

I can only scream. I lunge for her. I wanna tear her head off, but I feel the Boss burning me inside.

"What's your name?"

"Vassago!"

"Vassago!"

"Damn you both!" I cry.

Then she's gone and I collapse.

† † †

I'm on I-88 heading west. Boss tells me there's a couple primo fangs that way, getting fat and lazy on cornfed Iowans.

Shit got hectic in Chicago. I wound up having to go out her back window. Cops have my description, and I'm pissed at the Boss.

Backstabbing motherfucker.

I thought you considered my patronage worse than death. Or have you forgotten Robbie so soon?

You owe me another imbued.

Fine, fine, whatever you want. Potter's going to be lots of fun, and you deserve a reward for introducing her to me.

What makes her so special?

Don't get me wrong, John. You're wonderful when it comes to fucking people up. But she wants to redeem me. Unlike you, she still has good intentions. If I can bring her down... mmm.

Crazy. I'm actually hoping Potter toughs it out.

You think she'll resist where you couldn't? Not very likely.

Yeah, but I've seen a lot of unlikely shit in the last coupla years.

Nextstop, Davenport. Where do I look for the vampires?



CHAPTER 4: RULES AND STORYTELLING

How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!
— 2 Samuel 1:27

From the moment a hunter witnesses demons preying on defenseless people and he decides to *act*, he sets himself on a path that spirals slowly downward.

No matter what his goal or agenda — whether to destroy the supernatural or to help monsters exist alongside humanity — he finds the going hard. The obstacles are insurmountable, his enemies unstoppable, and his hopes perhaps impossible to fulfill. He has tools in the form of edges and second sight, but they're inscrutable and unreliable, and sometimes fail him utterly. To fulfill his goals, a hunter needs more tools, stronger ones. And he manifests them. He discovers that his abilities grow and expand as he pursues his agendas — but only if he commits himself fully to his cause. If he devotes himself completely, leaving family, friends and his old life behind. If he's prepared to sacrifice *everything*, even his sanity, to do what's needed, then he might actually succeed.

Of course, there's the opportunity to stop, to turn from the cause. A hunter can always pull himself back from the abyss — to simply quit, stop short or fail. And while he still bears the mental scars and derangements he's accumulated, he can save himself from self-destruction. But what does he gain in doing so? What

does he have left to return to — a life in tatters, a life he dismantled to pursue his mission? And even if he does have something to go back to, can he live with his choice — try to ignore the truth and force himself to live a lie?

For many hunters, there's no choice at all. Once you commit to the struggle with the supernatural, you see it through, if only because there's nothing left that makes sense apart from your crusade. So the chosen squares his shoulders, accepts the price, and carries on.

But the only way forward is downward.

The imbued have learned that with great power comes *not* great responsibility, but chaos and insanity. Hunters who manifest powerful edges always seem to have something *wrong* with them. Maybe it's a natural consequence of the struggle with the darkness. Or perhaps the imbuing is fundamentally incompatible with the human mind, body and soul. No matter the reason, the results are the same: powerful hunters with a grip on reality that is tenuous at best. Call them extremists, prophets, psychos, saints - the labels don't matter. All that's important is their power, their dedication and the danger they pose to monsters, ordinary people, other hunters and themselves.

And beyond the madness of extremists, beyond even their amazing capabilities is another height. A pinnacle at which hunters rise above even insanity to become something beyond comprehension. They become a force of nature that walks as a human. These imbued gain ultimate power, but in doing so they become separate from other hunters and perhaps from the human race. Burning terribly bright, these exceedingly rare imbued are consumed by their own might, but leave an indelible mark on the world in their passing.

What will hunters do in order to succeed? How far will they go to confront the supernatural? Can they resist the temptation to use *every* advantage available on their quest — some of which that may come at a high price? These are the questions many chosen must face in their “careers” and in a **Hunter** chronicle.

Previous **Hunter** supplements have discussed extremists, those hunters with 7+ Virtue ratings who receive potent gifts but who are stricken with madness. Beyond even these hunters are a very few who manifest level-five edges — the ultimate power of the imbued. Until now, the latter have existed outside the **Hunter** rules, as Storyteller characters. To “lesser” hunters, these bizarre imbued may have been unreliable allies, unpredictable enemies, champions to emulate or terrifying object lessons. They’ve been messiahs and monsters, but they’ve never been offered as players’ characters — until now.

Fall from Grace shows how to capture extremists and the heights of hunter existence in the Storyteller system. This book offers guidelines on how you can play such blazing stars. Extremists are more than just lunatics with immense power. There’s a method to their madness, and they have the capacity to do almost anything in the pursuit of their goals. Players need to understand that achieving this status means more than just adding a few dots to a character sheet. It demands radical and permanent changes to a character, and a whole new approach to the hunt and your chronicle.

Characters at this level typically remain playable for only a short period before dying, burning out or becoming something unrecognizable. But in that brief time, you can find new and challenging roleplaying experiences.

THE ROAD TO PERDITION

Having survived months of constant terror, strife and contention, your character has become not only more skilled, but also more potent, with high Virtues and stunning level-three and even level-four edges. Sure, he has a few derangements to deal with, but you can use

Willpower to overcome them if they become a problem. The important thing is that your character is still the same, only with more options and power-ups. Right?

Wrong.

Extremists are *far* more than just hunters with a 7+ Virtue rating and a few screws loose. They are beings so dedicated to and driven by their personal agendas that they have leave virtually everything else behind. For an extremist, there is no return to a normal life, or perhaps even the desire to do so. In time, all that can matter is her obsessive worldview. To free a town of supernatural influence. To destroy the creature that killed her husband. To make a particular being see the horrific error of its ways. When a hunter reaches this level of intensity, she has precious little in common with other hunters — or other human beings. They don’t see the facets of the truth that she does. They don’t understand what is expendable for a greater cause. They don’t know what lengths must be gone to if a difference is ever going to be made.

Indeed, some imbued wonder if these “blessed” hunters *are* still human. Physically, extremists seem normal. Unless they use edges, they still suffer all the limitations of the human body. It’s possible, however, that an extremist’s “madness” is not insanity at all, but that they simply no longer think like most people. What we would perceive as insanity may instead be a perfectly rational response to information and knowledge that we — or “lower” hunters — simply can’t understand. The extremist Fyodor is a perfect example of this alienation. He often seems to act erratically, changes allegiances for no apparent reason and says things that make no sense. But he is also privy to comprehension of and insights into bizarre forces and realities that are impossible for a normal human or most other hunters to grasp, let alone receive. Was he driven mad by his visions? Or is he able to receive his visions only because he has learned to think in a different way?

Then again, some extremists might be insane. They’re still altered by their fanatical dedication, but their growing madness might be due to an inability to cope with the change, rather than a process of adaptation. Such an extremist is a tormented soul, driven to follow her urges and goals, but unable to cope with the demands that are imposed upon her. Distanced from her friends and allies by her ailments, all she has left is the pursuit of her own psychotic agenda — the only thing that still makes sense to her.

Playing an extremist is a challenge. It requires coming at your character from a whole new direction,

because your hunter has changed from the character you originally created. You might want to re-evaluate where your character fits into the chronicle, and how he interacts with other imbued. And then there's the challenge of portraying madness in a realistic fashion. **Hunter** is not about superheroes. It's about ordinary people going to extraordinary lengths to perform miraculous acts. The following guidelines should help to play someone who has gone too far, too fast.

METHOD TO THE MADNESS

Some extremists suffer from conflicting derangements. They develop a mental ailment for each Virtue point they gain above 6, and are buffeted around almost randomly by conflicting, nonsensical thoughts and emotions. This kind of disjointed madness might be fine for Storyteller characters, but playing such a hunter isn't usually very satisfying. He may have no direction and can seem utterly inconsistent from one scene or session to the next.

As an alternative to this haphazard approach to portraying an extremist (which is recommended for only the best roleplayers), try creating a coherent worldview for your hunter as the basis for her insanity. As the character acquires derangements, her various psychoses combine with her personality and experiences to create a consistent — but irrational — view of reality, and you can decide your character's behavior based on that whole.

Consider Carol McIntyre, a hunter who develops the hypochondria, obsessive, paranoia and fugue derangements as her primary Virtue increases. Now, these conditions could all exist on their own, sending Carol in all kinds of different and paradoxical directions. But how could these ailments interact to form a single, complex insanity, and how might that complex syndrome evolve and change as more derangements manifest?

Let's say Carol develops hypochondria when she gains 7 Mercy. When she reaches 8 Mercy, she gains an obsession. What if the object of her obsession is disease, which connects to her hypochondria? Her next derangement, paranoia, could also be related to disease. Perhaps she's convinced that others try to infect her or carry a disease of some sort. At the pinnacle of her power and madness, Carol might enter fugue states when she really is in the presence of disease, such as being in a hospital.

Now to tie all those conditions into a coherent worldview: As she grows more obsessed with disease, Carol "realizes" that evil forces are creating diseases to destroy the human race. In every encounter with a



supernatural creature, she looks for the viruses and contaminants that must be at work. Every time she's exposed to a disease — even something as innocuous as someone with a cold — Carol risks entering a fugue state or lashing out with her edges to destroy the “evil.”

Assuming that the derangements you choose for your character all arise logically from her identity and chronicle, it shouldn't be difficult to find some way to connect them. See “Playing with Derangements,” below, for more advice on choosing ailments and how to roleplay their effects.

Once you establish your character's worldview, use it to help determine her goals and how she pursues them. Carol probably develops a goal relevant to disease since her very identity revolves around illness. Perhaps there really is a supernatural virus loose in the world and she dedicates her life to eradicating the source.

A coherent worldview is a powerful tool for an extremist pursuing her ideals. Extremists can make intuitive connections and deductions that would be impossible for a rational person to make. Or they can see signs and portents that are invisible to the sane. Their “increased” awareness can allow them to perceive threats and dangers where others might be blind.

But madness is also one of an extremist's primary obstacles. It prevents her from interacting effectively with other people and blinds her to things that might be perfectly obvious to the sane. And, of course, absolute madness can cause a hunter to recognize connections between events and people where none exist at all. She could go off on a wild goose chase or put citizens, creatures or other hunters in danger with no provocation whatsoever. For example, Carol McIntyre sees everyone as a potential Typhoid Mary, and only communicates with other people if they undergo sterilization procedures and rituals. Her obsession with sickness could also lead her to assume that a dead person has been killed by a virus, even if he's obviously been hit by a car.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

When the chosen are imbued, they're confronted by a dangerous reality. There are horrifying problems — rots attacking family, vampires preying on the helpless — that have to be dealt with *right now*. It's not until hunters gain some successes, experience and breathing room that they can aim for more remote goals — to find out *why* the dead are walking again, or to destroy the vampire crime lord controlling the city's drug market. As a chronicle progresses, hunters can fix their sights higher and higher and commit more and more to the goals they choose.

Extremists tend to take this natural progression one step further and fixate *utterly* on a goal. Even the most chaotic and erratic extremist works toward a target in her own way. This driving motivation can seem like the last tangible, reliable foundation of life. It's the grand purpose that her tattered mind *demand*s that she fulfill at any cost, because little else remains or seems to matter. Without an external goal on which to focus, an extremist could drown in the chaos of her insanity. After all, trying to address *every* creature and threat in the terrifying reality into which she's mired would be overwhelming. Examples of such focused goals are Fyodor's obsession to learn the secrets of the Messengers, Crusader17's drive to eliminate evil as he defines it, and Potter116's determination to cure any creature she encounters.

The player of an extremist hunter is encouraged to choose a goal that her character focuses on and works toward. The evolution of this goal is slow as your character moves down the path revealed at her imbuing, and that almost always leads further and further from her old life. She needs to find *something* to keep her motivated and directed, having lost so much of what she held dear before. Creating a strong agenda gives your character a reason to keep going, and a foundation to a life that's increasingly ragged around the edges. She finds a point to work toward, and ushers her energies in that direction, allowing her to exist while everything else in her life collapses.

Pursuing a goal can be your hunter's primary activity, and a major plotline in your chronicle. But what kind of goal is appropriate for your character?

It should be logical. No one just wakes up one day and decides to overthrow a government — not even an extremist. Your hunter's goal should arise naturally from your chronicle. It should be something that has been established earlier, that can now be explored in more depth. For example, if your character has been uncovering supernatural corruption in her city government, her goal might be to cleanse the taint from the mayor's office. Pursuing a goal that relates back to the chronicle makes for a satisfying story, and creates opportunities to involve the other characters in your hunter's objectives.

It should have emotional resonance. As well as story logic, a goal should have an emotional logic. An extremist's motive is an all-consuming passion, so it needs to be something about which he's passionate. Look for a good personal hook, a reason why your hunter cares so strongly. Maybe he wants revenge on the vampire that destroyed his business. Maybe he's

fallen in love with that vampire and stops at nothing to save — and have — her. If you make your character's goal something that he truly cares about, you'll find it a lot easier to get immersed in his story.

It should be achievable. Storyteller characters can have hopeless goals, but it isn't usually much fun to play a character on a wholly futile quest. Goals such as "destroy all monsters" or "overthrow the U.S. government" probably aren't attainable — not even for a powerful extremist. Come up with a goal that can be achieved. Your character might not be able to bring down the federal government, but she might be able to bring about massive changes on a city or county level.

It should be difficult. The pursuit of this goal occupies your character for several stories, if not the remainder of your chronicle. It shouldn't be something that can be wrapped up in a single scene or session. Don't wimp out with simple goals like "kill any old vampire" or "burn down that haunted house." Go for something that throws up obstacles, that requires a *process*. One easy way to do this is to build on a simple goal and make it complex. Maybe your character wants to destroy a specific vampire, but he has to find her, stop her plans and defeat all the other vampires she's created. Maybe your hunter wants to destroy a haunted house, but he has to find out why it's being haunted, and he has to uncover what keeps the dead as a whole from resting in peace.

The seeds of a goal can be planted in several places in your character's history. Even before reaching 7 Virtue and gaining a derangement, your hunter probably has hopes and aims. These goals might have been established before the imbuing, but they take on new meaning now. "Safeguard my son's future" is a goal any parent might have, but it assumes new significance when the hunter learns the truth about the world. A goal could be established soon after the imbuing, and then grow in significance as your character learns more. He might start by wanting to rescue his wife from a vampire-worshipping cult, only to realize that the cult spans the country and the only way to save her is to destroy the whole organization.

Or maybe a goal comes from an extremist's askew worldview (see above), something the hunter would never have fixated upon if he were still sane. Carol McIntyre starts to believe that supernatural forces create diseases to ravage humanity — and so develops a goal to save humanity from disease. As her Mercy rises and her madness swells, that goal mutates to suit her mindset. Carol increasingly fixates on finding and eliminating the sources of supernatural plague that she *knows* are out there, somewhere.

Many different goals can fit your hunter's personality, history and creed. Talk to your Storyteller about which ones might fit your chronicle. Between the two of you, you should be able to construct a purpose that propels your character throughout the game.

STORYTELLER: GRAND GOALS IN YOUR CHRONICLE

Extremists as players' characters can kickstart great stories and events in your chronicle. They can also be very disruptive elements that derail scenes, draw focus from other characters and irritate players. Handling an extremist in the chronicle requires some thought on your part, particularly on the character's goals.

A good motive for an extremist is a resource for *you*, not just the player. It's something that gels well with the history and direction of your game. It provides a starting point for interesting stories, and it creates hooks that other players can use to get their characters involved. By contrast, an inappropriate goal doesn't match the chronicle, and you can't use it as a focal point for stories (or can only do so by ignoring the stories and concepts you had previously decided on). A bad goal also leaves out the rest of your troupe. It allows no space for other characters' input, making the chronicle revolve around the extremist almost exclusively.

When you sit down with a player and discuss a goal for his extremist, consider the following.

Does the goal fit your chronicle's tone? By the time characters achieve high Virtue ratings, your chronicle should have a well-established tone. Still, people can have different ideas about the styles of stories that fit your chronicle. If you're running a gritty, street-level game in which hunters struggle for small victories, and the extremist player wants her character to reveal the truth about the supernatural on national TV, a collision of tones results. You may feel that such a goal is outside the theme of your game, and is therefore inappropriate. The same problem might arise if your chronicle deals with high-powered, epic stories, and a character's goal is to merely drive a vampire slumlord out of business. Make sure you and the player are on the same page about the chronicle's themes, mood and tone before you go any further.

Can the goal be used to develop interesting stories? Sometimes proposed goals can be just plain dull. Spending every day in a laboratory, fanatically studying a vampire's tainted blood might be something an extremist would do, but you can probably only develop one, maybe two, interesting stories about conducting such experiments. An extremist's goal should inspire stories that require him (and ideally his allies) to act and react in a lot of different ways. You probably want a goal that

can initiate a variety of different developments and repercussions. If a goal seems to have limited potential, discuss the possibility of expanding it with your player. If an extremist doctor wants to investigate vampire blood on a broader level, more story potential may arise. He needs to get samples, capture "subjects," conduct experiments, try out potential cures on vampires, and avoid the retaliation of the undead. Most goals develop immense potential with just a little tweaking on the player's part, whether he knows it or not.

Do you want to explore the goal? It's possible for a good goal to take your chronicle in a new and interesting directions, making stories possible that weren't before. That depends, though, on whether you want to go in such directions. Let's say your chronicle has revolved around events in a small town. The player wants her hunter to relocate to New York on the trail of a missing brother. If you want to develop stories and plots about the hunters in New York, that's great — but if you *don't*, there's a problem. If the player's idea sounds worthwhile, but doesn't suit the way you want the chronicle to go, say so. Maybe the idea can be reworked so that it better coincides with your plans. The brother might come back to town only to help pave the way for a cult of demon worshippers. The hunter can still work to redeem her brother, but the setting of the chronicle remains local.

Does the goal include the other hunters in a useful way? Fyodor's grand goal — to learn the truth about the Messengers and the imbuing — involves plenty of other chosen. Unfortunately, it involves them primarily as puppets, experiment subjects and victims. That's not a good way to make other players happy, so that kind of goal probably doesn't suit a character in your game. Nor may a goal that involves only the extremist, one that draws attention from the other imbued. If the extremist tries to win the heart of a vampire, other hunters probably aren't allowed much input into the relationship, and the other players may be bored and/or feel ignored any time the extremist's activities take the limelight. Luckily, most goals can be modified so they involve other hunters in a positive and interesting way. Perhaps the vampire would return the extremist's love, but cannot because other, more powerful bloodsuckers bind her mystically. Freeing the vampire from those bonds — and dealing with the consequences of freeing her — requires the aid of the other characters and allows those hunters a chance to be the focus of stories as well.

Does the goal fit the character? This is a basic point, but it's worth considering. The player probably understands

her hunter better than you do, but you should still speak up if an idea for a goal seems out of character. It may be that the player is attracted to a concept that doesn't really suit the character, and you can encourage her to consider variations. Or the player might surprise you and show you that the goal is very much in character. A hunter might not be likely to be drawn to the vampire who destroys his business, but when that bloodsucker turns out to be the great-grandmother of the character's deceased wife, and the resemblance across the generations is striking — it's a whole new ballgame.

PLAYING WITH DERANGEMENTS

Dealing sensitively with madness is one of the most challenging aspects of any roleplaying game. When portrayed convincingly, insanity can add layers of depth, texture and emotion to a session. Alternatively, a player can use it to demand all of the Storyteller's attention and reduce the game to farce. Derangements play a major part in the lives of extremist characters, and it's important to know how to deal with their portrayal without derailing your game.

A large part of the challenge is the fact that most people don't really understand what madness is. That's not surprising. By definition, madness involves defective mental processes that are so different from those of the majority of the population that they interfere with everyday life. That's a very difficult concept to grasp in concrete terms, because the condition defies concrete thinking. The easiest approach is therefore to fall back on quirks and eccentricities.

It's not difficult to tell quirks and eccentricities from genuine madness. The latter tendencies are amusing, showy or ineffectual, whereas true derangements blight your character's life. Someone who wears only yellow is quirky. A hunter who carries a stuffed fish with him at all times and insists that it gets a seat at meals, yet who takes a normal, active part in the hunt is eccentric. The quiet person in the corner who believes that his body is a puppet that he controls, and he has to keep cutting his arms and legs with a razor to remind himself why being hurt is deranged. As a rule of thumb, if you'd laugh with a person and say "you're mad" to him, then he's not, he's just eccentric. If you'd try to keep as far away as possible and say soothing things like "it's okay," he's deranged. Madness is never pleasant or amusing, and it consumes your entire existence.

UNDERSTANDING DERANGEMENTS

There are several different groups of mental defects that can lead to madness. These groups are not neces-

sarily derangements in themselves, but are different reasons or ways in which ailments may arise.

One common underlying problem is *defective association*. A victim experiences twisted logic, tangled deductions and/or irrational negative association. In other words, certain mental concepts or pathways are mismatched or crossed. That might be as fundamental as associating pleasure with pain and pain with pleasure, or as abstract as grouping objects by color rather than type, so that a gray car would seem more closely related to a sidewalk than to a blue car. Defective association can play a part in ailments such as masochism, associative disorder, self-mutilation, dissociation, depression, sociopathy and delusion.

Conceptual dysfunction manifests as the absence of specific ideas or concepts from the mind. In other words, the victim isn't able to comprehend a specific idea or item and isn't able to relearn it. All memory and understanding of the concept is gone, and the sufferer perceives the subject as something else. A person may classify all animals—even diverse ones such as birds or reptiles—as either cats or dogs, for example. Where the absent concept is more abstract—an emotion or a stage of the reasoning process—the results can be difficult to predict, ranging from psychotic tendencies to depression.

Emotional isolation is similar to conceptual dysfunction. People with this problem may not be able to feel any emotion, to understand certain emotions, or to even accept that other people have emotions. In extreme cases, victims may not be able to understand that treating others badly, even murderously, is any different from treating them well. Other victims may find that they have trouble interacting with society because they can't perceive—or feel—anger, friendship, love or other emotions, so are unable to relate to people. Such tendencies can contribute to sociopathy, psychotic rage, paranoia, depression and catatonic fugue.

Another problem is *compulsive delusion*, with which you intellectually *know* something is true, but sincerely believe otherwise. In a typical case, a person might look at a lampshade, see it is a lampshade, know it's a lampshade, and yet still be convinced that it's a stalker lurking in wait—and act upon that belief. The victim *knows* that the things he believes are patently false, yet he can't act against his feelings, so the experience is extremely distressing. The sufferer typically feels that he can't trust himself, or perhaps that he's an observer of his own life. He might develop behavioral rituals that let him carry out daily chores regardless of what he believes he sees. This general condition can contribute

to paranoia, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, delusion and a number of phobias.

Finally, *chronic delusion* involves hallucinations that the sufferer is unable to distinguish from reality. These may range from simple one-sense phantasms such as perceiving the smell of freshly baked bread, to modifications of reality such as suddenly thinking everyone is wearing the same red T-shirt, to full hallucinations of all five senses that completely block out reality, such as being convinced that you are back in your childhood home and six years old. The delusions may be occasional, intermittent or continuous, and acute cases may require that the sufferer be confined permanently for her own safety. This source of ailments can inspire paranoia, schizophrenia, depression and fugue.

ROLEPLAYING DERANGEMENTS

There are several guidelines that you can follow to help make playing a deranged character a rewarding experience for all. Always remember, however, that roleplaying is a social experience. The way you act as a player bears on the way other players understand your character. Obviously, the most traditional way to portray your character's challenges is through his actions and words, by roleplaying. It's also possible to increase everyone's understanding of your character's condition by being true to him both in *and* out of character. You could constantly act out a mild, non-threatening version of his derangements throughout each game session, doing things like staying out of the banter around the table or being snappy or aloof. Indeed, you could assume your character's ailments to some degree as soon as you come through the door to play. You know which approach might suit you best and make your fellow players most comfortable.

In order to play a deranged character you need to figure out how his mind works and how it affects his behavior. One way to decide is to make notes on which types of objects and events your character might react unusually to. If your character has paranoia, he might be fearful or distrustful of strangers. If a fellow hunter behaves unusually around your hunter, she may become agitated. If she's had experience with ghosts possessing people, she may use second sight any time a friend does something unusual or out of character, just to be sure. Think about different ways your character might react unusually to normal events, and make a list. Then, if your character encounters any of those situations, you're reminded to react abnormally.

By far the most important point to remember when portraying a deranged character is to avoid dominating the game. It's easy for a character's ailments to snowball

in influence until almost every aspect of the game is focused on him and you do most of the talking. That can be fun for you, but it's frustrating and boring for the rest of the group. For any game to work, *all* the players have to be involved, and a player with a demanding character is still responsible for sharing the limelight.

Being considerate of other players doesn't have to mean compromising your character's behavior. It just means being sensitive about the way you play. It would be easy for the player of a paranoid character to make a big fuss about becoming nervous when a fellow hunter gets too near. You could describe how your character shies away, makes accusations and demands to be comforted. It's just as true to the derangement, however, to tell the Storyteller that your character activates his second sight and checks everyone out. The latter approach is far less intrusive. A genuine paranoid would want to keep his observation of others subtle. If he did decide they were enemies and his only chance of surviving lay in violence, he could launch a surprise attack. In fact, an understated approach to inappropriate behavior can make your character's derangements *more* unsettling for other players. Histrionics and over-reaction quickly become ridiculous. A covert approach leaves other players wondering exactly how irrational your character has become.

There are also two other benefits to subtlety that help maximize the believability of your character. The first is that avoiding showy displays of ailments helps ensure that your character doesn't become quirky or eccentric. There's nothing specifically wrong with portraying quirks, but they don't work well outside of comedic games. (Being deranged does not automatically mean your character loses his fashion sense or can suddenly do complex math problems in his head.)

The second benefit is that most deranged people do everything they can to minimize their problems, including trying to avoid situations that might trigger a loss of control or that might make their ailments obvious. If they can resolve a situation without anyone noticing, they do. By being showy about derangements, you miss the whole point — that the problem is horrible and to be avoided at all costs.

ROLEPLAYING SPECIFIC DERANGEMENTS

There are many mental illnesses that we all know of, even if common misconceptions mean we don't understand them very well. In this section, we look at some of the best-known derangements, discuss what sorts of feelings they inspire and address how they may affect a victim.

Paranoia doesn't have to mean believing that a mighty conspiracy watches and plots against you (that's actually paranoid schizophrenia). Paranoia's root is the belief that you're the center of negative attention. People talking across the street are talking about you. Laughter is directed at you. Offhanded comments are veiled insults. Even good friends may seem to be mocking with feigned concern. It may start small with an occasional uncertainty that you laugh off, but it becomes so intense that it's overwhelming. This condition can make victims jealous, aggressive, depressed or withdrawn. However they react, they feel miserably unhappy and victimized. Paranoid characters may avoid public places, react strongly to vague innuendo or allusion, and become suspicious when any familiar person's behavior is different from normal.

Schizophrenia is a term that commonly covers a wide range of symptoms. At its most basic, it stems from some sort of irreconcilable conflict in your emotions or desires, and manifests itself in sporadic delusions or hallucinations. The condition may be associated with sudden mood swings, isolation and withdrawal. While in control, a character can be uncertain or in pain, frightened of suffering another attack, or perhaps determined to achieve something concrete while she still can. During an attack, she may be a lot more certain of herself, but the delusions she suffers may have unpredictable results.

Depression is very misunderstood. Most people think clinical depression means being unhappy. Real depression is the complete *absence* of strong emotion and motivation. A depressive doesn't become angry, excited, sad, happy, outraged or anything else. The world seems gray and pointless; nothing is worth bothering with. Sufferers do not become violent in general — there's no point making the effort — and may do what they're told just to be left alone afterward. Depression doesn't make people unhappy, because they're no longer capable of feeling unhappy.

Obsessive/compulsive disorder arises when you're desperate to reclaim control over the world, because you suffer delusions or feel powerless. It involves building precise rituals for dealing with the everyday, and those rituals may be repeated every few minutes if you're under stress. Obsessives are very defensive about their rituals and may become agitated or violent if they're threatened with disruption for any reason. A victim literally feels that his rituals are the only things holding his mind together.

Sociopathy is an unpleasant ailment with which you're incapable of perceiving other people as genu-

inely real, or of possessing real emotions or feelings. You are emotionally isolated and entirely self-focused, and feel no guilt about doing horrific things to people. Other areas of understanding are not affected, though, and you're aware that harming other people will result in punishment and/or confinement, so not all sociopaths are dangerous. The term "psychopath" is often mistakenly applied to violent sociopaths.

Multiple-personality disorder occurs when trauma forces the mind to retreat into one or more fictitious personalities as a means of escape. Any time your core personality feels threatened, secondary personalities take over until the source of the stress is resolved. The majority of these secondaries are children aged five to eight. Others are unreal creations, such as cartoon characters. Only a few are adult or confrontational. Certain specific actions may always be undertaken temporarily by a secondary, such as walking through an automatic door. A person's various personalities have no memory of what happens while they're dormant, although they are often aware of each others' existences and find the situation unpleasant.

Serious *phobias* are often underestimated. To be phobic about something doesn't mean that you find it distasteful, unpleasant or frightening. It means that facing the thing throws you into a blind panic, that thinking or talking about it makes you frightened or aggressive, that you will do whatever is necessary to escape the situation. If you're unable to avoid the distressing circumstance, you may suffer a nervous breakdown or even lapse into catatonia or fugue. Some sufferers are frightened also by things associated with their fear, such as climbing ropes if someone is phobic of heights.

CHARACTER CONSISTENCY

Derangements do not arise randomly. Like earthquakes, the majority of them occur at weak points in the mind, fault lines in the personality. Physical brain damage and disease work differently, of course, and depend on the part of the brain affected, but most derangements are linked to the personality and should suit a victim's identity as a natural progression of her.

Even derangements triggered by a high Virtue rating do not emerge from a vacuum. They arise from your character's personality, and are often a dangerous overemphasis of a previously minor personality facet. If and when your character acquires a derangement, consider her personality. Look for dominant qualities or behaviors that could be magnified into a mental problem. That way your character keeps her basic identity; it's simply intensified.

Many personality qualities are easy to match to derangements. Confidence or leadership can be magnified into megalomania. Caution or shyness can turn into paranoia. Organization or control can turn into obsessive/compulsive disorder. Suffering into multiple personalities. Frustration into schizophrenia. Courage or enthusiasm into hysteria. Pessimism into manic-depression. Guilt or repressed anger into fugue. Expressed anger into psychotic aggression. Or, lack of empathy into sociopathy.

If there is no obvious identity progression for your character's condition, consider recent events instead. A specific traumatic occasion might trigger insomnia, paranoia, hysteria or a phobia. Paranoia can arise from any betrayal or surprise attack. Hysteria might be the result of a close brush with death or the loss of a loved one. A recent car crash might inspire a fear of traveling in cars, or a bad gunshot wound could trigger fear of loud noises.

Your character's Virtues can also play a role in the derangements she develops. If she's one of the Merciful, she might manifest an ailment that involves withdrawing, such as paranoia, isolation or phobia. If she's an adherent of Vision, her condition may involve consideration, such as manic-depression, obsessive/compulsive disorder or insomnia. If she's a Zealot, her derangement may involve displacement of anger, such as multiple personalities, fugue or sociopathy. If she's closely balanced in two or three Virtues, the conflicting strains may cause schizophrenia.

By putting some thought into the way your character's derangements progress, you can ensure that she remains playable and believable without the need for complex storytelling gymnastics on your part.

BEYOND ALL LIMITS

A deranged hunter with a Virtue or two rated 7 or higher is a highly effective — if erratic — character, and can provide many sessions of challenging and enjoyable storytelling. If that fate and role is ideal for your character's identity and contribution to the chronicle, there's no need to seek any further, radical developments for him. This penultimate stage of a hunter's evolution is a satisfying experience in itself. But for those who want to push things even further — over the edge — there is one final stage: gaining a level-five edge.

No hunter "just happens" to develop a level-five edge. This pinnacle of power is not something that occurs naturally. Nor is it something a hunter recog-

STORYTELLER: EDGES AND CONVICTION

Beyond being mad and possessing high-level edges, extremists are also able to create very powerful effects with their low-level edges. Every **Hunter** power is based on a Virtue + Attribute dice pool. Extremists have Virtues in the 7 to 10 range, so their edge rolls are made with anything from 8 to 15 dice. Extremists are therefore unlikely to fail edge rolls, and can cause very powerful effects. A Martyr with 8 Mercy and Demand could rip a bank-vault door off its hinges. A Defender with 10 Zeal and Ward can create a barrier that no creature could hope to penetrate.

The situation becomes even more drastic when Conviction is risked. The player of an extremist who risks Conviction could roll more than 20 dice on an edge — guaranteeing not only an incredibly effective use of the power, but easily gaining *another* point of Conviction.

For Storyteller characters, you can use this level of reliable power to awe, impress or terrify players' characters. No hunter is entirely *casual* about using edges, but Storyteller extremists can come close. Players and characters alike may be taken aback when they meet a fellow imbued who never sleeps (thanks to the Vigilance edge), or who can easily and reliably read the thoughts of every creature he encounters (using Revelation). Even a hunter who *constantly* uses second sight can be unsettling.

When it comes to *players* with extremist characters, things get more complicated. Reliable, predictable powers are the stuff of superheroes, not the imbued. If hunters start using their edges casually, it can damage the mood and "power level" of your chronicle. Obviously, the accumulation of derangements is one balancing factor for such power, but you may find you need more options to regulate players' creations. Here are two suggestions to help offset the increased power of extremist characters.

First, be stringent about allowing extremist characters to gain Conviction. Hunters gain Conviction for achieving their goals and acting in accordance with their creeds and Virtues. Extremists have complex, strange goals that are extremely challenging to achieve. It should take more than simply calming a ghost or slapping wood on a vampire for an extremist to gain Conviction. She needs to make real progress toward her goal and act in accordance with her worldview. Yeah, the player is likely to accumulate Conviction from taking risks on edge rolls, but don't give her *anymore* Conviction unless her character *really* deserves it.

Second, an extremist's outpourings of power might incur unusual side effects. Normal humans certainly react with terror and confusion to the use of an edge, but when an extremist's degree of power is displayed, it might also affect *other hunters*. Decide on a "over-the-top power level" suitable for your chronicle; a number of dice that causes side effects when used in an edge roll (15 is a good figure). If that number of dice is rolled, other imbued suffer the confusion and forgetfulness that regular humans feel when edges are used in their presence. Second sight protects against this bewilderment as normal. You might even decide that if a huge dice pool is rolled (say, 20 dice), that other hunters' second sight isn't a reliable defense, and that extra Conviction may need to be spent, or Willpower rolls made, for other imbued to stay focused.

Wielding this degree of power doesn't necessarily make extremists seem "inhuman" or "wrong" to observers' second sight. These powerhouses may be mind-blowing, but they can still seem to be on the "right" side to other hunters. At least, these wackos can seem okay until they do something wild or dangerous to hapless people, undeserving monsters or fellow imbued. But then, there's rarely any warning of *that* kind of behavior.

nizes as a "career achievement" such as a title or corner office. This height is reached through either great effort to fulfill the kind of goal discussed previously, or is offered to a hunter by forces beyond humanity and perhaps beyond this world. Very few hunters survive long enough to obtain level-four edges. The struggle with monsters and one's own crumbling sanity destroys most imbued. Chosen who manifest a level-five edge are vanishingly rare. There may not be more than a dozen or two of them across the world. So, for your

character to obtain this degree of potency you must choose to accept the risks, and ensure that your hunter deserves the prize. The Storyteller must also decide whether to allow such power in her chronicle.

Technically, any hunter who has a level-four edge *might* eventually obtain a level-five edge. It's important to remember, however, that this is a much more complex and meaningful acquisition than just adding a dot to or entering a line on a character sheet. Along with the edge comes a whole new way of thinking, and many radical

changes in your hunter's personality. Don't take this progression lightly. It's a massive change to your character that has a profound effect on your chronicle. It's therefore important to keep a few things in mind.

FOR PLAYERS

Obtaining a level-five edge is one of the final, greatest achievements your character can ever make. There's very little left to accomplish from that point, except use the edge to achieve his greatest goals. Level-five edges typically arise near the end of your character's story. After getting one, there's probably little left but her death — and hopefully success in one last, triumphant act. Your hunter literally burns out from the power gained, or goes out in a blaze of glory or simply lives on borrowed time as her body succumbs to the might she wields. You may choose to pursue a level-five edge for your character if you're prepared for her to die or become unplayable shortly afterward. (Ultimately, her fate is at your Storyteller's discretion. He might even have some more stories in mind to tell with her, for a little while anyway....)

You should also be sure that such an evolution is *right* for your character. Is it appropriate for someone as driven as even an extremist to push himself toward power beyond all the limits of reason? Is it a natural progression for the

hunter? Is she really that focused or unhinged? If all you really want is a nifty new edge or a bigger spotlight in the chronicle, your Storyteller is unlikely to be sympathetic. If it's something that makes absolute sense for your character — if she has the all-consuming dedication or compulsive personality to go to such lengths — and you feel up to the challenge of playing such a being, only then should you discuss it with your Storyteller.

Some level-five edges are "normal," manifesting like any in a creed path that a hunter displays. Others come from different sources, ones that hunters have no comprehension of or control over. It's up to the Storyteller to decide if such external forces come into contact with your character. You can certainly approach the Storyteller and discuss your interest in such a transition, but the decision is hers to make. *Your character certainly has no idea that such options are available.* Alternatively, the Storyteller may decide that such a force makes contact with your character, even if you haven't contemplated it.

FOR STORYTELLERS

The presence of just one hunter with a level-five edge in your game can have an enormous impact on your chronicle. At this level of power,



the character has the potential to accomplish miraculous feats — to bring down an entire cult or lay to rest every ghost in a haunted asylum. To fit this level of power, you probably need to ratchet up the intensity of your adversaries and plot twists. Encounters with solitary, confused or weak creatures may seem paltry now. Maybe that level of intensity would wreak havoc on your planned story developments. It can always cause problems for non-extremist characters who might not have the strength to work alongside their powerful comrade, leaving some players feeling powerless and frustrated. And after the extraordinary character dies or moves on, you may find it difficult to return your chronicle back to its previous level. “Lesser” hunters are forced to witness a breadth or depth of reality that they’re not prepared for and unable to forget afterward. They may not be able to contend with monsters at all, or may lose healthy respect for any “weak” ones. For these reasons, don’t be afraid to veto a player’s request for a character with a level-five edge.

Now, having said all that, don’t be too hasty to shoot the notion down. Introducing a hunter of this magnitude as a player’s own, even for a short time, is challenging and rewarding. Everyone in the troupe may benefit from the experience. Think things through before you say yes or no, and be prepared to run with it afterward.

Due to the nature of level-five edges (“divine,” “corrupt” or “independent,” all of which are explained below), some characters may actually be approached by entities offering them this ultimate power. Obviously, that’s a decision for you, not the player, to make. You should decide whether a character with a level-four edge is approached by “divine” or “corrupt” forces. Do these entities contact *any* powerful extremist, or is there something about this hunter in particular that makes him attractive? If they *don’t* contact him, is it because there’s something wrong with him? What form does their initial contact take and what edge do they offer? Or might the character rebuke them both and find his own way to power? There’s more advice on how to decide these points, below, but it’s worth thinking about them early before you make decisions.

THREE PATHS TO OBLIVION

Most hunters don’t even realize that level-five edges exist. Such powers are simply unimaginable, or are so rare that their effects are almost never witnessed, or are reduced to ridiculous rumor — or are mistaken for the capabilities of *monsters*. Certainly, no imbued have learned that some of these staggering powers are actually related to — or so very different from — the “normal”

edges manifested by extremists. Nor do hunters know that entities other than the Messengers could offer such gifts. Not even power-infused hunters who wield these effects may know who or what bestows them.

There are in fact *three* different kinds of level-five edges available to suitable hunters.

Divine: When pursuing their all-consuming goals, many extremists undergo terrible ordeals and hardships. A hunter loses her mind, but may also lose everything she once cared about and be forced to compromise ideals she once treasured — everything that is and was precious to her. And yet, it might not be enough. Her goal may still elude her and she has to try harder and forgo even more. At this point, some extremists can be touched by a transcendent, inhuman power — similar to that of the Messengers, but still different, *greater*. This force offers the hunter the strength she needs to fulfill her aims. If she is worthy. If she will sacrifice everything she has left.

Those hunters who obey, who give of themselves utterly are filled with a majestic — perhaps even holy — power, one that cannot be opposed or denied. And as long as a hunter remains worthy of that power, she continues to manifest it until it may finally consume her.

Corrupt: Some extremists are on the long road toward their final goal and find the going more difficult than they could have possibly imagined. Certainly, the difficulties could be overcome, but only with extreme effort, time and sacrifice. Then some entity comes to them — perhaps subtly, perhaps overtly — and offers them an advantage *right now*. There’s only a small price, a minor bargain, and in return the hunters get vast power.

But it’s a tainted offer, a deal made with forces of indescribable evil. The power is real, yes, but it’s a poisoned chalice, the lure that leads a hunter into a trap. Before long, a hunter finds himself working as a pawn of dark powers, and perhaps even becomes an irredeemable monster himself.

Independent: Some extremists find the power within *themselves* to exceed their own limits. Consumed by their madness and commitment to the hunt, a *need* arises in these hunters to devote themselves solely and utterly to their cause. Their unshakable determination, their rigid focus on their goals, their uncontrollable madness — these are the tools they use to go beyond what other hunters are capable of. At great cost to their already fragile sanity, these extremists manifest a level-five edge appropriate to their creed Answerable to no one but

STORYTELLER: EARLY SIGNS

Corrupt and divine edges come from external sources. These cosmic forces don't just pick hunters at random, they look for imbued whose outlooks, methods and goals mesh well with their own agendas. For divine beings, this means a character with a goal that keeps her involved with the supernatural in some way, whether fighting, reconciling or offering guidance — and who shows great determination in pursuing that cause. Corrupt powers don't care *what* the character is doing. They're interested in hunters with damaged and antisocial personalities, hunters prepared to cut corners and hurt the harmless to fulfill their goals.

These forces might approach a hunter seemingly out of the blue, after watching her for awhile. (Ideas on how to run such introductions are offered later.) But it's also possible that the powers might "test the waters" earlier in the chronicle, before committing to approaching an extremist. In doing so, they gauge how receptive a hunter might be to a bargain later. This litmus test also allows *you* to see how interested a player might be to the notion of gaining a level-five edge for his character. If the player reacts negatively to hints and foreshadowing, you can drop the idea. If he reacts with interest, and his character reacts in a suitable way, then it could be worth following up later in your game, when the character is ready.

Here are some ways to foreshadow the presence of divine and corrupt powers.

- The hunter gets messages or visions from the Heralds that hint at greater things. These signs can come from divine powers, encouraging the hunter to push herself a little further. Or corrupt powers can briefly usurp the voice of the Messengers, urging the character to take the easy way out and not worry about the consequences. The form of these messages can vary wildly — see "Portraying the Ministers" and "Portraying the Corruptors" for some ideas on how these forces may communicate.

- Instead of sending out feelers to the extremist, the Powers That Be might prod other imbued that interact with her. Again, this approach is fairly subtle; the powers cannot command other hunters, only offer them hints and cryptic messages. Corrupt forces might encourage an extremist's allies to bring her a book of evil lore, and then observe what she does with it. Divine forces might direct other hunters to ask for the extremist's aid, distracting her from following her goal. If the hunter is easily diverted from her purpose, she might not be a suitable candidate for their final gift.

- The character might encounter a corrupt or divine extremist that has already entered the service of these forces. Such a devotee might encourage the character to learn more if she finds the extremist's power and demeanor intriguing. Or the "tutor" might act as a deterrent, terrifying the hunter and convincing her that such a path is wrong for her. Such a rejection might cause one set of powers to lose interest in the character — or make the opposing force suddenly interested in recruiting her.

- Alternatively, the hunter might encounter an "independent" extremist (explained later in this chapter) who has encountered the Powers That Be and rejected them. Such imbued are rare, but they do exist, and some of them warn other chosen of the dangers of falling under inhuman sway. This doesn't even have to be a personal encounter between hunters. The character in question might find a copy of Fyodor's *Apocrypha*, which alludes to the powers that might operate behind the imbued, and suspect that they hold sway over the author.

This sort of foreshadowing should be handled delicately or characters (and players) will become suspicious of what's to come. One or two incidents of this sort are enough for the powers to feel out a character's suitability — and for you to determine how interested the player is in a full-blown story of contact with otherworldly forces.

themselves, they use this new power to complete their crusades — or die trying.

An extremist can obtain that final, impossible power by one of these three means. He can fulfill his destiny or he can fall, destroyed by the power he had dared hope to control.

STORYTELLER: THE WHOLE STORY

If you're the Storyteller of your **Hunter** game, you're probably asking some big questions by now. Why are most imbued cut off from the highest levels

of their abilities? Why are some hunters given power from outside sources? What are those entities, and how can they lend the imbued such strength? The following background to the imbued and the forces behind them should go some way to answering these questions and others.

(Note that the following cosmology is used as backstory to the published **Hunter** books, but doesn't have to be canon in your game. Any "light" or "dark" forces in your chronicle need be nothing of the sort.

YOUR HUNTER'S FIRST TIME

Your hunter's existence has been a long and harrowing one. He's seen things that no person should witness, done things that no one should have to perform and borne the burden of a reality that no one should have to endure. The first manifestation of his edges could have been terrifying. How could he suddenly do these inexplicable things? Perform these miracles? Over time, however, as he became more focused on his objectives and perhaps jaded by his life, his edges might have become better understood, perhaps even trusted and relied upon. They may have kept him alive and helped him fulfill his driving goal when no tool or skill could.

When your character gains a level-five edge, however, he enters a new era. He reaches a new pinnacle of power that he couldn't even guess at (let alone, imagine) back in the days after his imbuing. Level-five edges are sheer, unbridled energy without bounds. If the first powers he wielded were akin to AA batteries, and the ones he developed later were the equivalent of car batteries, a level-five power is a lightning bolt.

Attaining this magnitude of power should be shocking and revelatory, even for a manic, broken extremist. The experience is reminiscent of the first time your character wielded an edge. It's startling, confusing and frightening. Your hunter can suddenly do something extraordinary and incomprehensible even to him.

Perhaps the best way to capture this monumental event in your roleplaying is to revisit the feelings your character had at the imbuing and in the days and weeks that followed. Allow him to be frightened of himself again. Let him remember what was important to him in his past — family, friends and dealing with the petty monsters he encountered back then. At least, let him remember until the weight of his compelling agenda comes crashing down again and he gets his mind around bringing this new capability to bear.

For tips on how to portray the manifestation of a level-five edge, see pp. 144-145 of the *Hunter* rulebook and apply the same experiences with low-level edges to these epic ones.

You might have your own explanation for who chooses and empowers the imbued, and you are invited to adapt the sources and manifestations of powers presented in this book as you see fit.)

Now is not the first time in history that heroes have arisen from humanity to defend mankind against monsters and oppression. It's happened at least once before, in specific parts of the world, in an almost mythical past. In a distant age when Creation and humanity were still young, the Heavens oversaw reality. Mankind lived a humble existence and honored the gods. And yet, the universe was vast, and it demanded much of the attention of the Powers That Be. In the gods' absence from the Earth, foul lords emerged from their dark places, jealous of the gods' power and of humanity's divine favor. Free to exact their will, these demons abused the world and mankind, imposed afflictions, inspired sorrow and stole life itself.

When the Heavens turned their gaze back upon the world, they saw what the demons had done. As punishment for the jealous lords' offenses, the gods chose heroes from among humanity to defend it against further harm. These warriors and champions ferreted out the demons' agents and severed corruption's grip on the land. A Golden Age of prosperity and joy followed as the chosen shepherded the human flock.

And yet, as time passed and the tasks of the chosen were completed, the warriors grew complacent. With the agents of the dark lords driven out, the heroes sought new challenges and entertainment. Eventually, they discovered that it was easier to gain power from weaker creatures than by carrying out their sacred duties. They learned how to tap the life energy of their people in order to gain strength, and the discovery spread. In the downward spiral that followed, the chosen fell to fighting amongst themselves as they captured human followers, claimed power, struggled for control and staked their claims on the Earth.

When the Heavens realized what had become of their creations, they delivered divine justice once again. The world's heroes were damned to a miserable existence, and they retreated to their lonely dens. Despairing, the Creator of All and his Ministers turned their backs on Creation and the cycle of ages. A shadow fell across the world, and the demons crawled from their holes to wreak havoc once more.

Ages passed, and the powers of darkness came to dominate the world. The Ministers, perhaps less severe than the Creator Himself, felt compelled to intervene before all of creation degenerated into chaos. This time, though, they resolved to make less corruptible agents. These new champions — the imbued — would be weaker, more limited. Lacking great power, they would not be misled by power. What they lacked in raw ability, they would make up in numbers. Limiting themselves to

only fleeting contact, and giving hunters the tiniest portion of their power, the Ministers hoped that these agents would suffice to hold back the dark hordes.

But the Ministers, having little understanding of human thoughts and nature, did not see that their agents would not be content with limitations and mere hints. Hunters needed to know their true purpose, and found their abilities insufficient to battle the darkness as they wanted. The imbued looked for help — and dark forces answered.

The most powerful and evil beings — too vast to even exist in this reality — had longed to regain control here. While they could not act directly in the world they could still reach out to mortal agents. Using the same mechanism as the Ministers, some of these beings have made contact with the most powerful (and unstable) hunters and offered them the strength and information the imbued crave — in return for service. Now these forces use corrupt extremists as cat's-paws and servants.

In response, the Ministers have decided to rescind their previous self-imposed prohibitions. In order to halt the corruption of their servants, the Ministers have begun to make direct contact with hunters once again, as they did ages ago. To those few imbued deemed worthy, the Ministers offer the power that was previously withheld, and the opportunity to strike at the heart of the dark beings threatening the world. Now the Ministers and the dark forces target each other directly, using these amazing and mad imbued as their weapons and champions.

DIVINE INSPIRATION

Are the imbued agents of God? Some hunters certainly think so. Even agnostic or atheist hunters find it hard to come up with an explanation for their condition that doesn't involve some sort of higher power. It's possible that a "divine" will is responsible for hunters' change — a vast and incomprehensible force that has little in common with the humans it influences. This force tends to be content to imbue individuals and leave them to fend for themselves, occasionally prodding them with garbled and cryptic messages. But in a few rare cases, this divinity returns to a subject — an extremist, one whose dedication and knowledge approaches that of heroes who were blessed and empowered in the distant past. The divine power offers the hunter great strength and incredible capabilities and asks only for his mind, soul and individuality in return.

THE ORDEAL

In order to be chosen by the powers to receive a level-five edge, an extremist must prove himself worthy. The higher powers don't care if a hunter is brave, kind or pious. They care only that he is willing to push himself to the limit — and beyond — in pursuit of that to which he is fixated about the supernatural. To qualify for a level-five edge, the hunter has to be willing to suffer arduously for his cause.

If a hunter qualifies for a level-five edge — that is, he has a level-four edge in his creed path and a rating of 10 in his primary Virtue — the higher powers may watch him, gauging his worthiness. If they feel he has potential — if he strives to follow the hunt despite all costs, if he willingly compromises the things he cares about in order to succeed — they may contact him with an offer of power. But first, he must prove himself.

As the character works toward his great goal, milestones are reached; developments or accomplishments propel him further toward his destiny. The hunter striving to demolish a worldwide demon-worshipping cult finally tracks down its headquarters. Carol McIntyre, obsessed with the connection between disease and the supernatural, destroys a nest of vampires that spreads HIV with unclean fangs. In her effort to cleanse her hometown that's corrupted by an evil spirit, Lorna Willborn confronts and forgives her childhood rapist. These milestones are achievements but aren't enough to satisfy the extremist. They're only markers on the road to his destination, not the destination itself. But these accomplishments are signs that he's advancing. They're successes that inspire him further toward ultimate victory.

At some point in your chronicle, your hunter sets his sights on a new milestone, just as he has done before. But this time the road will be hard, worse than ever before. Reaching for this vital prize will push him to the limits of his abilities and strip him of everything he believes is important. He will be abandoned by his allies, accused of treachery, and stripped of his strength and power. Like Job suffering trials, the hunter is forced to prove his righteousness by struggling onward even while he has no reason or right to carry on.

The hunter has a choice. He can continue along the path of thorns until he reaches the next milestone, never giving up or allowing himself to be defeated. Or he can turn back, beaten by overwhelming odds, unable to go beyond the limits of dedication. Those who turn back are abandoned by the higher power — left broken and bleeding (if not already dead), never again to be consid-

ered for the ultimate blessing. The hunter who prevails and proves his worth may be contacted by a force that can only be called "godlike."

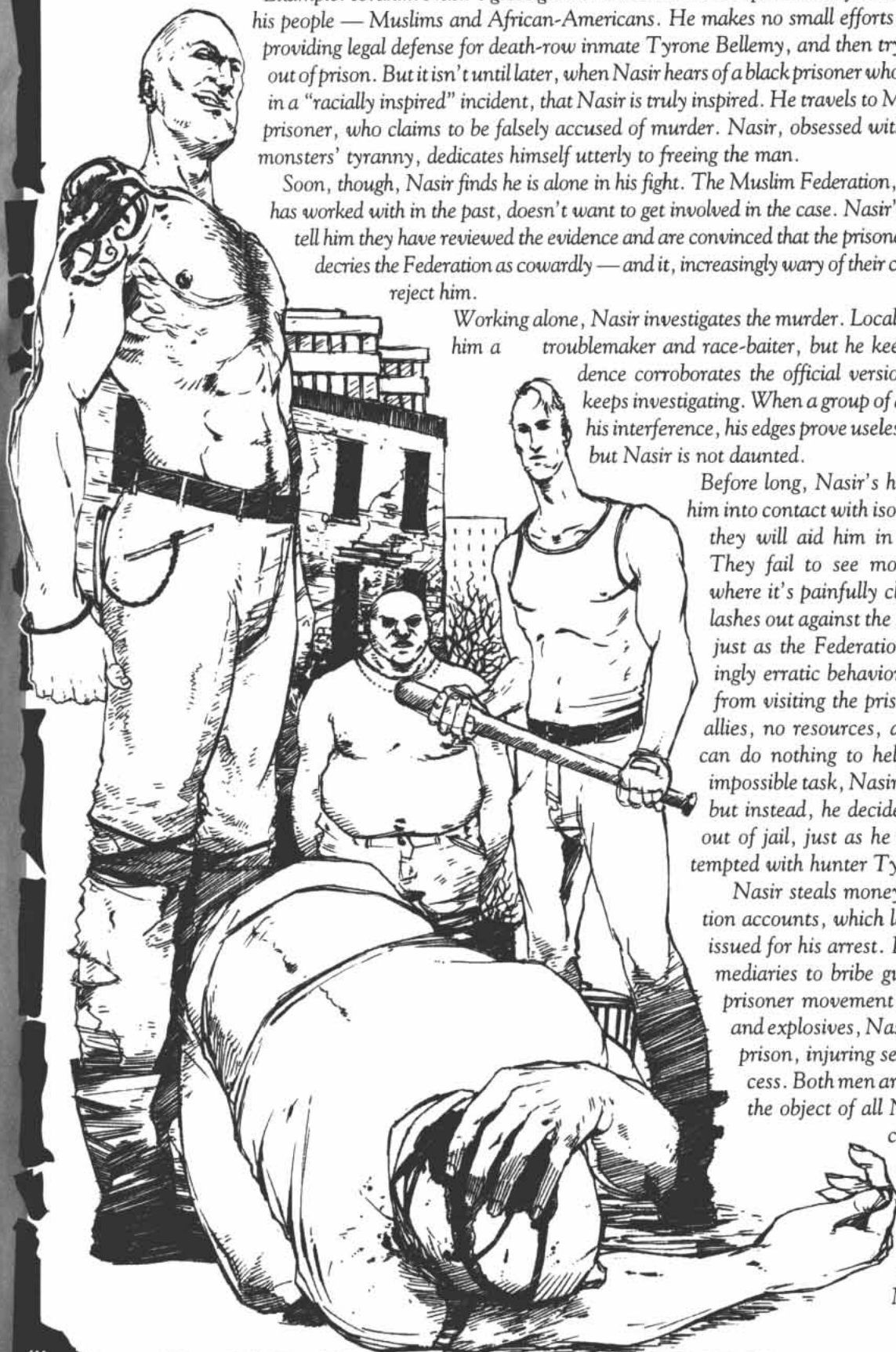
Example: Ibrahim Nasir's great goal is to beat back the supernatural forces that he believes oppress his people — Muslims and African-Americans. He makes no small efforts, in one significant case providing legal defense for death-row inmate Tyrone Bellemy, and then trying to break the hunter out of prison. But it isn't until later, when Nasir hears of a black prisoner who attacked a prison guard in a "racially inspired" incident, that Nasir is truly inspired. He travels to Mississippi to speak to the prisoner, who claims to be falsely accused of murder. Nasir, obsessed with finding justice against monsters' tyranny, dedicates himself utterly to freeing the man.

Soon, though, Nasir finds he is alone in his fight. The Muslim Federation, the organization that he has worked with in the past, doesn't want to get involved in the case. Nasir's allies in the Federation tell him they have reviewed the evidence and are convinced that the prisoner is guilty. Nasir angrily decries the Federation as cowardly — and it, increasingly wary of their colleague, cut him off and reject him.

Working alone, Nasir investigates the murder. Local citizens and police label him a troublemaker and race-baiter, but he keeps digging. All the evidence corroborates the official version of events, but Nasir keeps investigating. When a group of angry locals beat him for his interference, his edges prove useless and he is hurt badly — but Nasir is not daunted.

Before long, Nasir's hunt for the truth brings him into contact with isolated imbued. Not even they will aid him in rescuing the prisoner. They fail to see monster activity at work where it's painfully clear to Nasir. When he lashes out against the hunters, they reject him just as the Federation did. Nasir's increasingly erratic behavior even gets him banned from visiting the prisoner in jail. He has no allies, no resources, and his imbued abilities can do nothing to help him. Faced with an impossible task, Nasir is tempted to give up — but instead, he decides to break the prisoner out of jail, just as he and the Federation attempted with hunter Tyrone Bellemy.

Nasir steals money from Muslim Federation accounts, which leads to a warrant being issued for his arrest. In hiding, he uses intermediaries to bribe guards and get details of prisoner movement. Armed with weapons and explosives, Nasir breaks the man out of prison, injuring several guards in the process. Both men are now on the run — and the object of all Nasir's attention finally confesses that he did, in fact, commit the murder in a fit of rage. He did it of his own free will and was not "influenced" by anyone. Nasir has thrown his life,



allies and future away for nothing. The only way he could hope to reclaim what he has lost would be to turn the man in. But Nasir fights the temptation and uses the last of the stolen money to smuggle the escapee into Mexico. Perhaps monsters motivated the man to kill without his knowledge, or used him as a cover for a crime they actually committed. Meanwhile, Nasir stays in America.

Then one night, the powers come to him in his dreams.

BLESSINGS

Now that your hunter has proven just how far he will go in pursuit of his agenda, the divine powers come to him. There are many ways in which the powers could appear. Sometimes they speak directly into a subject's mind just as the Messengers do — but louder, more urgently. They may appear in a storm of images, visions of sacrifice and victory, blessings and ordeals. They could appear in dreams, in signs, in a burning bush. They might even send a person — or what looks like a person — to present their case. These forces have few limitations and tailor their appearance to suit the situation, their own unfathomable desires, and the comprehension of the hunter they approach.

The powers make the character an offer — perhaps straightforward and simple, perhaps oblique and confusing. *You have proven your worthiness. If you will do our work, you will be rewarded.* The divine powers wish the hunter to follow their instructions, to do their bidding in his interactions with the supernatural. In return, he will receive their guidance — and their power.

If the hunter refuses, the powers leave him and never return. He remains his own person, but must still deal with all the acts he has committed and sacrifices he has made to reach his current position. Such a hunter can never gain a divine edge, but may yet obtain a corrupt or independent one (see below). If he accepts the offer, divine energies flood through him, changing him forever, remaking his personality in the process.

STORYTELLER: PORTRAYING THE MINISTERS

As Storyteller, it's your decision as to whether a character might receive a divine edge. Not every extremist is a suitable candidate for the Ministers' favor. The divine powers choose hunters who show limitless dedication to a cause, pushing themselves as far as they can go to achieve their dreams. But it's not enough to strive for a goal. A hunter has to be chasing a goal the Ministers approve of. These powers created the imbued in order to counterbalance the supernatural forces of the world. Many extremists have goals that fulfill this purpose, whether it means destroying all monsters in a town or running an "underground railroad" for salvageable

vampires. Some extremists, however, focus on goals outside the Ministers' supernatural focus, such as creating an extended family and holing up in a Montana compound. Extremists who turn their back on the Ministers' purpose are not considered for a divine edge, no matter how dedicated they are to their individual causes. These people just don't do anything to attract the Ministers' attention.

If you decide to offer the opportunity for such an edge to a hunter, you probably want to develop a story that revolves around the character's ordeal. This story pushes the hunter to his limits, and if he measures up, he might receive his reward.

ORDEALS

The Ministers need to determine whether a hunter is worthy of their blessing. If a hunter has already undergone tragic suffering and shown his willingness to give everything in the pursuit of his goal, that may be enough to convince the Powers That Be. But in most cases, not even extremists push themselves far enough to satisfy these beings, so they test the hunters. Such a trial is ideally a story in your chronicle that pushes the hunter to his limits.

What kind of story can you develop about this ordeal? It should be something difficult, almost impossible. The Ministers want to know that a hunter can take care of himself. They want to see determination. They want to see the hunter's emotions come into play. And they want to see him ignore those emotions and push himself onward despite any reservations.

What elements are core to the character's personality and story? Does he have a beloved relative, a favorite possession, a primary method of investigation? If so, that facet of the character can play an important role — the character loses it, at least temporarily. When forced to choose between protecting his brother or chasing his quarry, he is expected to forsake his brother. If a Merciful hunter seeks to protect a creature but his fellow imbued want to punish it, the protector is expected to side with the creature — even if his allies turn on or assault him. Ibrahim Nasir was forced to break his ties with the Muslim Federation in order to pursue his goal, and his work with the Federation was a major part of his identity and purpose.

While the ordeal of every candidate for divine favor is unique, some factors are common to them all.

- A trial should last for several chapters and involve a wide variety of scenes and challenges. The story should be about more than just combat, investigation or emotional turmoil — it should involve all of these things.

- The hunter should be stripped of the tools and advantages that he usually relies on, which might include his weapons, resources, allies or anything else that is normally a significant aid in his stories. It's easy to keep striving when you know you have a fully stocked arsenal and friends to back you up. It's a lot harder to keep going when you're broke, starving and alone.

- The hunter's edges and second sight should be vital at some point in the story, and useless at another. It's important for the hunter to prove that he can use the gifts of the Ministers effectively, so there should be supernatural challenges to overcome with edges. But it's also important for the hunter to prove that he's willing to continue his quest without his amazing advantages. His powers could be useless for several scenes. Maybe he has to deal with normal people upon which edges and second sight have no effect. It could mean several scenes of conflict with the supernatural, with the hunter running out of Conviction to power his edges. Or maybe his Conviction is reduced to zero and kept there artificially.

- The character's derangements should play a major part in the story. There could be scenes in which the hunter has to resist his madness in order to succeed, as well as scenes in which he has to willingly embrace them but still succeed despite his erratic actions.

- Each new event in the story should take a toll on the hunter. Each scene should bring the risk of injury, rejection by allies, or a loss of Conviction or Willpower. The Ministers need to see the hunter *suffer* to know that he can persevere.

Ibrahim Nasir's ordeal is a good example of this sort of story. His task — to free a prisoner believed to be the victim of the supernatural — incorporates a variety of different challenges — combat, struggling with bureaucracies, investigating the crime, and confrontations with other imbued. He sacrifices his allegiance with the Muslim Federation and with other hunters, and becomes wanted for embezzlement. He relies on his edges and second sight when searching for monstrous involvement, but has to work without them when battling mundane opposition. And his progress is made more complicated by his mental instability — the very inspiration for his crusade — which leads him to orchestrate a jailbreak and become hunted by the law.

When motivating an extremist into a divine trial, don't be afraid to use the Ministers and the hunter's Patron Background to drop hints, information and inspiration. Even if the character doesn't have a rating in Patron, he can receive more messages than usual. Consider the hunter to have 2 Patron for the duration

of this story. He is under direct Minister scrutiny, after all. Use this guidance from above subtly. The player should never suspect that the Ministers are setting his character up. Instead, you as Storyteller are simply constructing a harrowing and challenging story.

For example, a monster-hating character might hear the Ministers say "THE ROOT OF ALLEVIL" when he encounters a vampire. The monster is dangerous and corrupt, but not as powerful as the message implies — although the hunter doesn't know that. Further messages such as "DARKNESS GATHERS" or "THE DEAD KING RISES" further the impression that this is a powerful creature responsible for much evil, and that destroying it will be a major milestone in the hunter's crusade. With that kind of encouragement, the hunter is likely to go to extensive, if not extraordinary, lengths to find and deal with the vampire.

(Also remember that not all hunters hear the Messengers — or Ministers — as booming voices. Some see visions, see words in newspapers rearrange momentarily, are visited in dreams by "spirit guides," and by many other means. Whatever the medium the Ministers use, their advice can be used to encourage a hunter to undergo an ordeal. She might receive a vision of an abandoned mine shaft and *know* that it harbors an evil force, or find that her I-Ching consultations keep pushing her toward a confrontation with the leader of the local imbued.)

You can also influence other players' characters to get involved in the extremist's trial by use of the Ministers. Even if these others aren't eligible to receive a divine edge, the Ministers can still manipulate them. If the Powers That Be want other imbued to cooperate with their chosen subject, the allies might receive the same messages he does or perhaps ones of encouragement such as "THE CAUSE IS JUST" or "THERE IS TRUTH IN MADNESS." The Ministers are more likely to pit other hunters *against* the extremist, however, so that he must prove his worth without aid. Even if allied imbued initially cooperate with the extremist, they could easily be encouraged to turn against him with messages such as "STOP THE MADNESS" or "DESTRUCTION WITHOUT BOUNDS." Depending on the messages you transmit, you can inspire the hunters to work together — or arrange a situation in which the extremist and fellow chosen come to blows.

Don't go overboard with such otherworldly intervention, though. The Ministers can inspire a chosen subject to overcome a specific obstacle, and they can manipulate other hunters to make *them* into obstacles, but the Ministers can't simply wave their hands and create trials to throw at an extremist. Nor should you

take direct control of anyone's character. Be fair with your players. If you don't, they may resent their characters being commandeered.

OFFERING POWER

When a divine candidate has pushed himself as far as possible, giving up everything and still persisting in his quest, the Ministers come to him. It might be when he finally succeeds in his mission, despite all that success has cost him. Or it may be truly *impossible* for the hunter to succeed in his quest, no matter how he strives. In such a case, the Ministers might appear, give him aid and a chance to succeed, after all — but only if he would have continued the struggle on his own, not caring that he could not possibly prevail.

The Ministers do not necessarily come to the hunter in a subtle form. There may be no reason for them to hide now. How they appear varies from hunter to hunter, based on what each can comprehend, just as the hints of the Messengers are different for every other imbued. The chosen one might hear a voice in his head, like that of the Messengers, only louder, more powerful. He might be subjected to a flood of visions, images of sacrifices and power, broken bodies and burning bushes. A pious hunter might see angels coming to greet him, while another might dream about the ghost of his mother telling him that he is blessed.

Whatever form the Ministers take, the message is generally the same. The hunter has proven his worth, has shown that he is willing to do whatever it takes to reach his goals. The Ministers are prepared to reward his dedication — if he serves them directly. If he accepts their offer, he will receive great power, but the Ministers will push him to further his aims and theirs, to take a greater role in righting the imbalance between the human and supernatural worlds. The power comes at a price — the Ministers are clear on this.

Whether or not the hunter accepts the offer, he finds himself in a difficult place after his ordeal. The character has probably burned many bridges, lost friends and allies, and racked up a variety of legal, financial and social problems. Dealing with the consequences of the ordeal can be a story in itself, especially if the hunter rejects the Ministers' offer. Alternatively, the character can turn his back on those consequences and take the chronicle in a new direction. (Other possible avenues for the extremist are explored under "Power Corrupts" and "Independents," below.)

BENEFITS

When your hunter proves himself, he receives the blessing of divine powers. In many ways, he becomes

something more than human, and more than any imbued. The entities behind the imbuing channel their power directly through him.

Your character gains the following benefits.

Edge: He manifests a level-five divine edge. It can be selected from the list below, or the Storyteller can design an edge suitable for your character. The power should be appropriate to his identity and personal mission (and creed to some extent). An Innocent is unlikely to receive a combat-focused edge, for example, and an Avenger might not receive an edge that grants visions and insights. Beyond that, creed doesn't necessarily have bearing on what potent edge a divine hunter can wield. The Storyteller might decide to award a divine extremist one of the level-five edges published in a **Hunter** book, but those powers are typically the province of "independent" extremists. They're essentially acquired by gaining strength from *within* the structure established by the Messengers, not from *without* as divine extremists gain it.

A divine hunter can manifest only a single level-five edge, and can never receive another.

Patron: Your hunter gains the Patron Background at a rating of 5, permanently. Your character doesn't hear the Messengers as other hunters with this Background do. He now receives direction directly from forces even greater. Think of the Messengers as a filter that distills the voice of those forces. Without that filter, your character receives guidance directly from the source. That means different sorts of sensory input for the character from then on. The guidance of the powers is still cryptic and confusing, but it's stronger and contains more information. As well as hearing voices, the hunter might see visions, speak to the powers in his dreams or simply *know* whatever he needs to. Of course, this can mean the powers order your character directly, telling him what they want him to do. Will he have the courage to defy his masters when they order him to commit acts he cannot condone?

Aura: The presence of a divine hunter electrifies any other imbued in the immediate vicinity. All hunters within 10 yards of your character (except for "corrupted" hunters; see "Power Corrupts," below) receive messages and directions from the Messengers as if they had 3 Patron. Characters who already have 3 or more dots in Patron notice that the "volume" of the Messengers is turned up slightly, making any guidance a little louder and more insistent.

Receiving such messages in the vicinity of your character can be a dizzying and confusing experience for other hunters. It can be like experiencing the imbuing all over again, or suffering a barrage of shouted

instructions. But the experience can also provide much needed information and assistance on the hunt. All hunters in your character's proximity can receive the same information or input from the Messengers, each character can have a different experience, or different characters may be able to interpret the same message with a separate meaning. Other hunters continue to receive a Patron rating until they move more than 10 yards away from your extremist.

Conviction: If your hunter has a starting Conviction rating of 3 (which includes all hunters, except for Avengers, Martyrs and Waywards), his rating increases to 4, permanently. The powers are always there, guiding and aiding your character, and their presence increases his vigor for the hunt.

DRAWBACKS

While a divine hunter is incredibly powerful, he pays a great price for that might. When he allows the divine forces to enter him, it's like an electric current that burns him from the inside out. The forces give him clarity and focus, alleviating much of the madness that he suffered previously. But in order to "make room" for their influence, the divine alter your character's very nature and personality. A divine hunter is a vessel, fueled by a holy flame, but that flame burns away much of who he once was to make him a worthy champion.

Personality: Both of your character's Nature and Demeanor change to one of Autocrat, Dreamer or Fanatic. That is, Nature and Demeanor become the same, and both become one of these three Archetypes. If your hunter's Nature already was one of these, it can remain the same and Demeanor changes to suit it. Your character's personality is subsumed by the higher powers. A change in Nature and Demeanor does not mean a change in your character's driving goal (assuming it hasn't already been fulfilled). It merely means he pursues that goal for different reasons and in different ways.

Derangement: Until now, your hunter has had a number of derangements. Choose the one that is most pivotal to his personality and his goal. That might be the first one he gained at 7 Virtue, or one acquired later that best defines his goal and worldview. Carol McIntyre's most important derangement is her obsession with disease, even though her worldview started with hypochondria. Your hunter is alleviated of every derangement he has except for this core instability. The divine give your character new clarity, burning away the madness that has tormented him for so long. He has only one derangement now, *but this one can no longer be controlled by spending Willpower*. A human personality

cannot withstand the force of the divine without suffering harm. Your character, once able to hold his madness in check by sheer force of will, can no longer muster the strength to control his damaged psyche. Flare-ups of his single ailment burn out of control.

Willpower: Your hunter is now a broken person, even if he's powerful. He rarely draws courage or strength from day-to-day life, only from winning victories on the hunt and obeying the orders of his masters. In game terms, your character no longer regains Willpower during downtime or from a night's sleep. His score is not restored to full between stories; it remains the same. He regains Willpower from acting in accordance with his shared Archetype, and perhaps for reaching milestones on his quest, but he often seems uninspired and listless compared to other, more sane hunters. Furthermore, your character's permanent Willpower rating cannot be increased with experience points. It cannot be raised any higher than it is when he obtains his divine edge.

DIVINE EDGES

Divine edges are quite different from the "normal" edges manifested by other hunters. Strictly speaking, divine edges aren't "edges" at all. The effects of the imbued are powers created for frail human bodies to contain. The level-five edge of a divine hunter is actually the raw might of the divine itself, channeled through a hunter who tests the limits of human potential. Divine edges all have the following features in common:

- They are not restricted by creed or Virtue. A hunter could manifest any divine edge, as long as it suits his benefactors' will. (He can possess only one power in total, however.) Divine edges never rely on a particular Virtue for their effects. They operate using the character's primary Virtue, whatever that is, which is rated 10.

- Divine edges are almost always highly visible. They can manifest in bursts of brilliant white light, flares of energy or roaring flames. It's impossible to use one subtly or secretly. They cause a display that everyone in the immediate vicinity notices. Normal humans are still confused and forgetful after witnessing such effects, but most hunters and supernatural creatures recognize and recall the results.

- Many "normal" edges affect one sort of entity — creatures or the imbued or ordinary people. Divine edges affect everyone equally. They do not distinguish among targets. An edge that affects the mind of a monster can do the same to a hunter or a normal person. Some divine edges such as Cremate, below,

might affect only a particular kind of entity, but these limitations are usually side effects of the edge's main purpose (in the case of *Cremate*, to obliterate all signs and remains of the dead so that they cannot be harnessed by the supernatural).

- Divine edges cost four Conviction to activate, rather than the two required by most "standard" level-five edges (those available to "independent" extremists and as printed in the *Hunter* rulebook and in the various creed books).

The following are examples of divine edges and what they're capable of. Storytellers should feel free to design more powers to suit their chronicle and the players' characters using these edges as guides.

CREMATE

Perhaps the supernatural's greatest sin is that it has cheated death itself. In pure nature, death is an ending and a beginning, part of an ongoing cycle. Supernatural creatures such as vampires, ghosts, zombies and necromancers upset this balance and make a mockery of the natural order. *Cremate* is intended to fight such blasphemy, to protect the bodies and souls of the dead and to ensure that the natural cycle is enforced.

The hunter concentrates and a soundless explosion of light erupts from her. Any dead body in her vicinity is instantly consumed by fire and energy, burning the corpse to ashes. Any undead creatures caught in this explosion are also consumed. And even if they can endure, they are burned and mutilated.

System: Spend four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Strength (difficulty 6). *Cremate* affects any dead body within a number of yards equal to the successes achieved on your roll. Those bodies are burned to ashes instantly. This process is so efficient that it leaves no remains — bones, teeth, clothes and pacemakers are reduced to ash. The heat from the bodies does not set surroundings on fire. *Cremate* affects only the remains of dead creatures, animals and people — it does not set wood on fire, even though wood is the "dead body" of a tree. Once a body is consumed, the fire winks out.

Bodies destroyed by *Cremate* cannot be resurrected, reanimated, possessed by spirits or affected in any other way. If a person's corpse is destroyed by *Cremate*, that person does not rise as a ghost in the future. And if a dead person's body is subjected to *Cremate* after he has become a ghost, the spirit is harmed no matter where it is located as if subjected to the power in person (see below). Ashes left by the edge are resistant to forensic analysis. No amount of study or

science is able to determine the identity of a body, or even that ashes were once a body.

If an undead creature — a vampire, zombie or ghost — is in the radius of *Cremate*, it takes a number of levels of lethal damage equal to the successes achieved on your roll. This damage cannot be soaked with Stamina or powers. *Cremate* sets the creature's very essence alight, not just its flesh. The creature can make a Willpower roll (difficulty 8) to reduce the damage, however. Each success reduces the harm suffered by one level.

Cremate can only be used once per scene.

DENOUNCE

A hunter with this power can channel the wrath of the divine into a single word or phrase — a judgment made upon a person or creature that has been found wanting. The power of this word rips apart a subject's very being. It does not injure or wound her, but it leaves her weakened and chastened for the rest of her existence. Unlike most divine edges, *Denounce* does not create a display of light or fire — merely a word that echoes like thunder in one pair of ears.

Just what word is used with *Denounce* is up to the hunter. It can be a whisper or a scream, a single syllable or a string of words. A pious hunter might shout, "God judges you!" or "I cast you out!" A more withdrawn hunter might simply whisper "Burn" or "Wither." The hunter can use a different word or phrase each time he uses *Denounce*. What matters is his intent to weaken the subject of his wrath.

System: Your character speaks a word or phrase. Spend four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Charisma (difficulty 6). *Denounce* can affect any single, specified target that can hear the word. Deaf targets are not affected by the edge. Nor are those who are too far away to hear the word. (The effect cannot be accomplished through a megaphone or loudspeaker.) It's necessary for the target to be in the same area as the hunter — the word cannot be transmitted over telephones, recorded on tape or reproduced artificially. If the target hears the word, it may resist with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8). Others who hear the word are not affected — only the person targeted feels the edge's power.

For each success from your roll that remains, the target loses a Trait point permanently. *Denounce* can affect the target's Attributes, Abilities and permanent Willpower. The player decides what Traits are affected. Your character must know a target possesses a particular Trait in order to affect it, so Abilities can be affected only

if the hunter has some knowledge of the target's capabilities. Attributes and Willpower can be reduced to a minimum of 1, while Abilities can be reduced to zero — effectively destroying a target's ability to use the talent, skill or knowledge forever. (Experience cannot be spent to restore lost points of any kind).

Channelling the immense power of the divine is more than a mortal frame can bear. After using Denounce, your hunter suffers a level of lethal damage that cannot be soaked. Denounce can be used only once per scene, and it can affect a given target only once. If a target has lost any Trait levels to Denounce — ever — any attempt to use the edge on him a second time fails. The hunter can keep using the edge on a given target, however, if previous efforts have failed to remove any Trait points from the intended victim.

INFUSE

More than any other divine edge, this capability hearkens to the heroes of the ancient past — resplendent warriors of light with awesome power. Surrounded by a blazing halo of light and heat, the hunter is blessed with great physical power, and a majesty that strikes fear and awe into the hearts of friends and enemies alike.

System: Spend four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Stamina roll (difficulty 7). The successes on this roll enhance other rolls and capabilities. Conviction can be risked on this edge roll, but not on any rolls enhanced by this power.

Successes rolled are applied to all of the following applications:

- Successes are added as dice to your hunter's soak pool. If lethal damage is incurred, these extra dice can be rolled to soak that damage.
- Successes are added to the damage pool rolled when Melee or Brawl attacks are made. The type of damage normally inflicted with an attack does not change — bashing for a punch or lethal for a knife, for example. This effect cannot be combined with the effects of Cleave — your hunter must use one edge or the other.
- Successes are added to the pool of any Social roll used to intimidate, impress or command others. Your hunter's will is simply hard to resist. Such efforts work on normal humans, other hunters and supernatural creatures.

The successes from your Virtue + Stamina roll are applied equally to every benefit above, not spread or divided among them. It's also important to note that the successes are added as dice, not automatic successes.

The halo of light created by Infuse is not bright enough to blind opponents, but it is bright enough to

be noticed even in direct sunlight. Infuse can be used once a scene and lasts for a number of minutes equal to the successes rolled. If your hunter is Incapacitated, the edge's effects cease. The effect can also be terminated prematurely if your character chooses.

POWER CORRUPT'S

In their relentless pursuit of overriding goals, extremists face opposition and obstacles constantly. Some of these challenges can be overcome fairly easily, such as lowly creatures that don't perceive the dangers extremists pose. Some resistance is daunting but can be defeated with effort and loss. And some obstacles can seem insurmountable, to be overcome with only the greatest effort and commitment. No matter their scale, these distractions slow the hunter down and keep him from fulfilling his goals — the only desires that give his existence purpose anymore. If only the hunter had another way or a helpful tool.

Some extremists hear a whisper amid the buzz of the Heralds. Some receive dreams in a rare peaceful night's sleep. Some hear an urgent voice calling to them in a pitched battle. Wherever the message comes from, however it's phrased, it always says the same thing, *If you need power, you can have it.* And if the hunter agrees, if he takes the easy way out, if he accepts the offering, he is granted strength. And he is forever lost.

As opposed to gaining a level-five divine or independent edge, gaining a corrupt power requires no effort or sacrifice, no mental anguish. It does, however, require a hunter who's prepared to meet the devil halfway — someone whom (on some level) is already corrupt, already rotting around the edges. A hunter who cares little about others, who's prepared to trample people underfoot to get what he wants, who wants to make his enemies eat 10 pounds of shit before they die, or who simply craves immediate results and doesn't care how they're attained. Only such a hunter is willing to make a deal with the devil to get what he wants — or needs.

All the hunter has to do is consider an offer and not ask too many questions about who or what makes it. All he has to do is accept a bargain without worrying about the terms. All of a sudden, he receives a level-five edge — a powerful capability, and one unlike the edges of other hunters. Getting a corrupt edge is comparatively easy. It's what happens *after* your character receives it that's hard.

POISONED CHalice

A hunter who gains a corrupt level-five edge must have 10 in his primary Virtue, can be of any creed and must have the level-four edge of his creed

path. That progression in power makes him receptive to what demons have to offer. One might think that with such power would come commensurate wisdom, and yet a hunter who accepts the invitation of the darkness does the unthinkable. He allows a primal, bodiless force of evil to enter his soul. The invader — call it a demon, devil or evil spirit, they all apply — cannot force the hunter to obey its commands. Not yet. But it worms its way into his mind — pleading, cajoling, threatening. The monster might speak clearly or communicate in visions or dreams. Maybe it even remains hidden so that the hunter never realizes he's possessed, but no matter how you cut it, the extremist has sold his soul. Yes, the possessor allows the hunter to use its power, to strike down the terrible creatures that the host can see. But in return, it asks a favor. Just a little favor at first, and then bigger ones.

In order to keep benefiting from the demon's power, the hunter must meet its demands. At first, these requirements are minor — the demon might ask the hunter to strike down a certain creature, to threaten but not hurt an occultist, to retrieve an old book and give it to another person. Such tasks seem innocuous, and perhaps they are — but they're still a trap. Soon the demon demands that the hunter perform an act he finds morally abhorrent — kill a hapless person or burn down a hospital. Depending on the nature of the hunter's possession, the character might not even realize he's being ordered about. The demon might send him dreams or visions that show him performing terrible acts over and over again — until the hunter finally acts out his nightmares in an effort to indulge or exorcise his fantasies.

These activities further the demon's unknown agenda, but they also break down the hunter's resistance, slowly corrupting him to a point at which he no longer hesitates to commit atrocities for his master. Eventually, the extremist is either weak from resisting the demon's orders or so debased that he is barely human. In either case, the demon makes its play. It attempts to expel the hunter's soul and possess the extremist fully, gaining a body and the ability to act directly in the world. That's when the dark forces have claimed another victory over the divine and stolen yet another champion from the Powers That Be, just as was done in ages past.

A lucky, determined hunter who has made a deal might have the strength to put a bullet in his own head before he falls completely. A weaker extremist becomes one of the very things he once struggled against.

STORYTELLER: PORTRAYING THE CORRUPTORS

As with divine edges, it's your choice as to whether an extremist character might be offered a corrupt edge. There's less work involved with corruption, because you don't have to orchestrate a story about a character's trials or ordeal. Instead, you just have to give some thought as to what the corruptor wants, and how it attempts to push the hunter toward that goal after the character has received the power he craves.

THE OFFER

The dark force that tempts the hunter is *not* the same as the Ministers, but it has more in common with them than it does with humanity. The being is an ancient evil spirit that makes the world and humanity its plaything, just as it did ages ago. The being uses its proximity to the world and its denizens to usurp the "connection" between the Messengers and a hunter, allowing it to offer the character guidance and strength in return for favors and an anchor in reality.

When a demon notices a powerful hunter and attempts to corrupt him, it plans its approach carefully. Not even the most insane, debased or desperate hunter reacts positively to an overt offer of power from an evil entity, so the corrupter usually disguises itself. Some mimic the Messengers, speaking directly into a hunter's mind. They drop cryptic hints such as "THERE IS AN EASIER WAY" or "AID IS WITHIN REACH," offering aid or results. A subtler way might be to appear in dreams or to mimic the voice of a trusted ally or loved one. The demon has some ability to read the hunter's mind, even at this early stage, so it can tailor its approach to target the extremist's vulnerabilities. Oracle 171 is a corrupt extremist. She once thought the Messengers were her father speaking as an angel, so the demon that came to possess her appeared as a second, wiser angel, a form she was predisposed to trust and then obey.

The means used to make contact also depends on the demon's capacity to communicate with a hunter. A spirit may be unable to speak in ways that are intelligible to humans, so the being might approach the hunter in visions, surges of emotion or just by placing knowledge directly into his mind. Not all demons can communicate in simple and direct ways, so feel free to come up with creative means of interacting with a hunter. Perhaps the character gets emails that don't originate from any existing ISP. Perhaps he comes to believe that his dog whispers secrets to him.

If the hunter ignores any offers or refuses to accept, the demon may cut its losses or persist. Further offers

might be more insistent, more cajoling or perhaps just better timed. A hunter is more likely to respond to an invitation of power in a crisis than when at ease. Eventually, even the most persistent corrupter gives up if a hunter refuses all offers. Many imbued eventually take the offer, though. The demands of the hunt are just too much to fulfill without help, and these chosen do not necessarily realize that they doom themselves.

QUID PRO QUO

Once a hunter accepts a demon's offer and uses the edge offered, the demon can take up a parasitic "residence" inside the hunter's mind and soul. The demon's "self" — the bulk of its essence — remains separate from the hunter, somewhere else in the world. This arrangement means that killing the hunter does not kill the demon. It might weaken the being momentarily, but no more. Similarly, the demon is silenced and isn't aware of the host's activities when the hunter activates second sight, but it can communicate with and regain the imbued's awareness as soon as the sight lapses.

After taking up residence, the demon probably continues to communicate with the hunter in the same style it did to make its initial offer. That might be because it can communicate no other way (some demons are so alien that words and language are foreign concepts). But even demons with adaptable communication abilities probably keep using the same means of interaction — and the same lies told about their true nature — because a hunter might finally resist if told the truth. The choice depends on how the corrupter thinks the hunter will react to the truth. A pragmatic, debased extremist like Rigger111 might take the revelation in stride, not caring about his damnation. A more sensitive hunter like Oracle171 needs to be coddled and protected from the truth, or she might rebel against her corrupter.

However the demon presents itself and communicates with its servant, it soon begins to push the hunter into following its agenda and working toward its goals. The terms of the relationship are simple. The demon will order, suggest or beg the hunter to perform a task, simple or challenging. If the hunter doesn't cooperate, the demon withholds its aid and the hunter cannot manifest his level-five edge. Like any extremist with obsessions to pursue and goals to fulfill on the hunt, the hunter still faces challenges on his path. If he does what the demon asks, the corrupter does its part to help the extremist realize his agenda.

It's possible that a subtle demon could achieve and maintain this relationship without the hunter even knowing he's possessed or being used. The hunter might simply feel urges or impulses to commit terrible

acts — compulsions that accompany powerful instincts and flashes of inspiration that help him accomplish his objectives. If he fights those urges, his edges and instincts desert him — only to return when he gives in. It probably isn't long before the extremist becomes dependent upon the gifts he occasionally manifests, and the demon can watch as the hunter corrupts himself.

This *quid pro quo* arrangement continues until either party gets everything it wants — at which point, the demon turns upon its servant and attempts to destroy his soul and possess his body (see "The End of the Line," below).

What kind of agenda does the demon have? Most want to boost their powerbase on Earth in some way — gain followers, destroy their enemies, gain relics of power or tomes of occult lore. The corrupter's true essence could be contained in an object of some sort, and obtaining control of that object might be a primary goal for the demon. Furthermore, devils are creatures of pure evil; they exist to destroy and corrupt. Some of a beast's requests may not further its agenda directly, but it can still revel in the horror caused when its hunter murders unsuspecting people or interferes with the efforts of uncorrupted imbued.

When deciding on your demon's agenda, keep it simple. It wants a certain object, a certain person dead or a certain government instated. The ultimate goal should be difficult to reach, but not impossible. This goal should also be fairly compatible with the hunter's own overriding goal so both can be pursued at the same time. A good example is John Coaler's desire to kill the hunters whom he feels abandoned him, which also conveniently eliminates threats to his demonic master. A devil possessing our disease-obsessed hunter might assist her in destroying the plague pits of London — mass graves from the time of the Black Plague. It's just a happy coincidence that the pits are the hiding place of the demon's infernal rival.

Come up with a few acts that the demon needs the hunter to perform to reach the being's goal, and a few that are just for shits and giggles, such as killing ordinary people. The latter "small" atrocities serve a double purpose: They indulge the demon's hatred of humanity and wear down the hunter's resistance to the possessor's efforts to take control.

BENEFITS

Edge: The hunter gains a corrupt level-five edge. It can be selected from the list below, or the Storyteller can design an edge suitable for your character. The

choice of edge should reflect the character's personality and methods. It might have positive application if the hunter doesn't know he's possessed, or it could have devastating effects if the imbued wallows in the pact he's struck. Primary Virtue and creed have no bearing on which infernal edge a character may gain. Indeed, the Storyteller could decide to award a corrupt extremist an appropriate level-five edge published in a **Hunter** book, instead. Those powers are typically the province of "independent" extremists, though. They're essentially acquired by gaining strength from *within* the structure established by the Messengers, not from *without* as infernal extremists gain it.

A corrupt hunter can manifest only one level-five edge, and can never receive another.

Patron: Your character gains the Patron Background, rated 5, permanently. The demon constantly feeds him orders and information. If the character had dots in Patron before his possession, those are replaced with his new rating. The Messengers can no longer contact the hunter with their clues and mysteries. He receives input from his corrupter alone, and it has its own style of contact, voice and agenda. A demon might not reveal to a hunter that the person next to him on a train is a zombie, but it may tell him that an intended quarry is talking on a cell phone at the next stop. The demon may communicate in visions, in an imitation of the Heralds, in a conversational tone or in archaic speech. It may give clear and more immediately useful information than the Messengers ever did — but only a fool forgets that a demon has its own purpose and reasons for sharing (assuming an extremist even knows he's possessed).

DRAWBACKS

Taint: Accepting the power of a corrupter separates an extremist from his fellow imbued — even more so than he was before. To other chosen, your character is no longer one of them. He is a monster himself. A corrupt hunter registers as "wrong" to second sight, and observation edges such as Witness and Illuminate can indicate that he's somehow tarnished or fallen. Darkness may seem to be cast across him constantly. He might cast a shadow that has wings or an inhuman shape. What's more, the extremist is now subject to edges that affect creatures. Hunters can, say, conceal themselves from the extremist using Hide, or hold him back using Ward.

These are permanent changes and are enforced even if the extremist does not manifest his demonic edge at any given time. Even if the hunter could somehow

manage to expel the demon from his soul, he would still be tainted until his dying day (and perhaps beyond).

Revulsion: Contact with a demon is more than any human soul can bear. Listening to the demon's voice or being subjected to its influence can leave a hunter feeling nauseated and violated — or worse, can strengthen the darkness in the hunter's soul. In any scene in which your character interacts extensively with its demon possessor (accepting an order, asking it questions, taking its advice) or he uses his corrupt edge, roll Willpower. The difficulty starts at 7, and may be higher depending on what terrible acts your hunter performs. The Storyteller decides the final number. On a successful roll, your character manages to bear the horror of the demon's presence a little longer. On a failed roll, he loses a point of Willpower. On a botch, the hunter loses a permanent point of Willpower.

Second Sight and Edges: Your character is no longer connected to the Messengers. He no longer receives their hints or visions to guide him on the hunt. He is still able to manifest the edges he had before becoming corrupted, though. He can also activate second sight. When second sight is active, his demon is silenced and doesn't know what the character thinks, sees or does at the time. The protection of the sight temporarily severs the corrupter's link to the hunter's soul. But if the hunter manifests his corrupt edge while second sight is active, the sight instantly ends and can be reactivated only after the edge's duration is over. Similarly, activating second sight while a demonic edge is active instantly causes the edge to cease. In either case, you have to spend Conviction to reactivate the terminated sight or power afterward. Apart from these changes, your hunter's second sight functions the same way as it did prior to his fall.

Corruption: The greatest drawback to your hunter's pact is, of course, the constant temptation to follow his demon's advice, which eventually leads to his destruction. His demon may never admit that it works to that end, but isn't that the classic point to all deals with the devil? When your character's permanent Willpower rating reaches zero (see "Revulsion," above), he is possessed by the demon permanently. His soul is destroyed.

As your character's internal struggle unfolds, does he resign himself to damnation or struggle to retain what little of himself that remains? Does he strive to stay clean, relying on the demon's power only in times of extreme danger, and then punishes himself afterward for his weakness? Or does he come to accept his vulnerability, perhaps even reveling in the freedom to

break the law and defy morality? Will your character become a monster or somehow save himself before his ultimate collapse? Such is the challenge of playing a corrupt hunter.

What happens to your character if and when he loses his struggle is up to your Storyteller. He could become Storyteller property; an antagonist whom other hunters may stalk and fight. He could become one of the irredeemable damned, playable as a foe in **Demon: The Fallen**. Or the infernal spirit occupying your character's body could be immersed in the reality of being human and seek penance for his sins, becoming a playable **Demon** character. It all depends on where your chronicle is headed and what avenues your troupe is interested in exploring.

CORRUPT EDGES

Corrupt edges are even less like "normal" edges than are divine ones. Corrupt edges are utterly alien, the product of a demon channeling its corrupt powers through your hunter. These edges often have monstrous, bizarre effects. Corrupt edges have the following features in common:

- Like divine edges, the powers of darkness are not restricted by creed or Virtue. A hunter can manifest any single corrupt edge, as long as the creature inside him is capable of producing the effect. Edge rolls are always based on your character's primary Virtue and its 10 rating.
- A corrupt edge can allow your hunter to perform feats that most normal edges cannot — change shape, raise the dead, warp reality and reach beyond the material world. It's challenging to create subtle effects with these powers, though. They're sledgehammers, not scalpels.
- Seeing a corrupt edge in action usually terrifies and confuses normal humans, as well as hunters unprotected by second sight. The mechanical result is the same as for the confusion caused by some monsters' powers. Witnesses to corrupt edges are overcome with fear, revulsion and brain-wracking horror.
- Like divine edges, corrupt edges are rarely selective in their targets. While a normal edge might affect only creatures, leaving hunters and mortals untouched, a corrupt edge typically works on anyone or anything in the vicinity.
- Because of their versatility and alien nature, corrupt edges cost four Conviction to activate, rather than two.

The following are some possible corrupt edges. The Storyteller can create a unique one for your character based on these examples.

CHANNEL

We all know the image of the classic "demon" — a nightmare monstrosity with claws and horns, wings and scales. Through the power of his dark master, a corrupt hunter can become such a creature, actually changing shape for a short time to assume devil form.

When transformed, the extremist is a horror to behold. Spikes burst from his scaled skin, inch-long claws emerge from his fingertips, and bat-like wings burst from his back. The hunter is deformed with little semblance to humanity. He is a monster. The hunter is also a killing machine — stronger and faster than humanly possible, able to shred flesh with claws and fangs, and with skin like armor.

System: Spends four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Wits (difficulty 7). If the roll succeeds, your hunter transforms into a demonic creature. This is a real, physical transformation that is obvious and terrifying to anyone in the vicinity. Clothes are ripped and torn, wings emerge, guns cannot be held in misshapen hands. Infernal form persists for a number of turns equal to the successes you achieved on your roll, although it may be undone prematurely if the character chooses. After this time, the hunter reverts back to his normal state. Channel can be used only once per scene and requires a full action to complete; no multiple actions are allowed when transforming.

The hunter receives the following benefits while in demonic form.

- The total successes you rolled are added as bonus points to your character's Physical Attributes. Each success used raises an Attribute by one point, to a maximum total of 7. You choose which Attributes are raised, and they can be different every time your character uses this edge. If you get six successes on the roll, you might raise each Physical Attribute by two dots. If you get six successes again on another occasion, you might improve your character's Dexterity by four and his Stamina by two, leaving his Strength unchanged.
- Your character can soak both bashing and lethal damage with his Stamina rating. If his Stamina has been improved by the change, he soaks damage using his new rating.
- Your character's claws and fangs are similar to knives, doing Strength + 2 lethal damage. Roll Dexterity + Brawl to hit with these weapons.
- The spines growing from your character's skin damage anyone who touches him or attacks him unarmed. Anyone hitting the hunter in this fashion takes two dice of lethal damage.

- Using his wings, your character can fly at a speed equal to his normal running speed. If his Dexterity is improved by the metamorphosis, recalculate his speed using his new rating.

While in demonic form, your hunter cannot speak or communicate effectively. This is a killing shape, ill suited for anything but destruction. If the hunter becomes Incapacitated, the edge's effects cease and he reverts back to his normal form.

ENTHRALL

The hunter can influence the minds of people and even monsters by using honeyed words and impassioned speech. This isn't telepathy or mind control (not exactly). The hunter becomes so charismatic in the eyes of his audience that members would do anything he asks. Under the influence of Enthrall, people agree to create cults, overthrow governments or even sacrifice their loved ones at the hunter's whim. Supernatural creatures are slightly more resistant to the edge.

System: The hunter addresses a target or a group of targets. He has to speak for at least a minute, so this power isn't usable in combat. A number of targets up to the hunter's Manipulation can be affected at one time. If more people listen, the hunter decides which are affected. Subjects must be in your character's physical presence; he can't be on TV or recorded.

Spend four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Manipulation (difficulty 7). Targets resist with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8 for humans and hunters, 6 for monsters; one roll can be made for all members of a group or the Storyteller can roll for each subject individually, as he chooses). If the subjects don't get more successes than you do, they consider your character a wise and wonderful person who should be obeyed or even worshipped.

The effects of the edge last indefinitely (although your character can repeal them completely at any time, at will). Affected subjects continue to revere the hunter while he is Incapacitated and even after his death, raising him to the status of a messiah who looks down from Heaven upon his devoted followers. Subjects may eventu-



ally overcome the effects of Enthral if the hunter forces them to act against their nature or personal well-being. It's up to the Storyteller to decide what actions might cause a subject to rebel. Sacrificing one's family, defying religious beliefs or demonstrations of the hunter's corrupt nature might all qualify. Wavering followers get another chance to resist with a new Willpower roll, and can add successes achieved to any rolled in previous efforts to escape. When accumulated successes finally exceed those you gained on your initial edge roll, the subject throws off Enthral's effects. Your character cannot use this edge on a follower again until he or she breaks free, although it's unlikely that many of them defy his will if he is careful not to push them too far.

The Storyteller may decide that particularly potent or ancient monsters are particularly resistant to Enthral and make Willpower rolls against a difficulty lower than 6, or that they get one or more automatic successes on the roll.

Hunters with active Conviction are unaffected by Enthral, but can be brainwashed like any other normal person when their second sight is inactive. If a hunter is captivated and later activates second sight, Enthral's hold may be broken completely or the character may regain control only for the duration of a scene, after which the obedience is restored. The Storyteller decides if subsequent use of second sight can break Enthral.

This edge can be used only once per scene.

TRANSPORT

For all the powers of the imbued, they are beings of this world, this reality. Some have seen hints that there are worlds beyond, levels of existence invisible to reality — but all they get are glimmers. A hunter with Transport sees more than glimmers. He can reach out and touch the fabric of a different space. Indeed, he can tear it open and open a tunnel.

Invisible to the human eye, a doorway hangs open for an instant, long enough for the character to slip through before it closes behind him. In that alien space, time and distance do not mean much, and the hunter is bombarded with incomprehensible stimuli. Moving through a "tunnel" in that space, the hunter exits out the other end — hundreds of yards from where he entered.

System: Spend four Conviction and roll your character's primary Virtue + Wits (difficulty 7). If the roll succeeds, an invisible gateway opens for an instant and envelops him. Hunters with active second sight see a brief glimpse of a jagged hole in space, filled with roiling energy and clouds of black light. To every other witness, it's as if your character simply disappears.

In the next turn, your hunter reappears some distance from his original position. Walls and obstacles are meaningless. The character moves outside the real world when using Transport. The only thing that could thwart your character's travel is Suspend, the level-five Redeemer edge (*Hunter*, p. 154), which blocks movement out of this level of reality.

The distance traveled depends on your roll — up to 100 yards per success achieved. Your character hunter can "aim" for any destination he can see, instinctively knowing how far the edge can reach when activating it. It's also possible for the hunter to appear at a destination he can't see as long as his demon mentor can sense the location and guide the edge's effects (which is a matter for the Storyteller to decide). There is no danger of reappearing within solid objects; your hunter's infernal guide makes sure of that. If he chooses, your character can travel a shorter distance than your successes would indicate.

Moving through the tunnel's alien space is a traumatic and unsettling experience. The first use of the edge in a scene calls for a Willpower roll as usual to test for "revulsion" by your character's damnation (see p. 111). Each subsequent use of the edge in the same scene increases the difficulty of the Willpower roll by one. A hunter who relies heavily on his edge soon crumbles under the strain of seeing that which humans are not equipped to comprehend, and he rapidly falls to absolute corruption by his mentor.

No other people, hunters or monsters can be brought with your character when he travels.

INDEPENDENT'S

Not every extremist hears the whispers of divine or dark forces. And some who are tempted by these entities manage to resist offers of power. For either kind of hunter, there is another way — their own.

At their core, the imbued are limited in capability. Deliberate blocks were put into place to prevent them from achieving the most powerful edges. But a few dedicated, deeply insane hunters unwittingly find that those boundaries are not impassable. With great effort and a dedication that no sane person could manage, some extremist hunters transcend their limitations and reach the height of power — the level-five edges of their creeds.

Such might comes at a heavy, terrible price. The effort required to break through the barrier imposed On High shatters a hunter's already fractured personality. Once she was a normal person. Over time, as her

Virtues increased, she became increasingly unstable. When she obtains a level-five edge, however, your character barely thinks or acts like a human being at all. Everything she is, every thought she has is dedicated wholly and solely by her personal worldview and overriding goal. She can no longer control the madness that she has fought against for so long. And most of the time, she has no wish to.

An independent extremist is not an ordinary person anymore, she's a *force of nature*. While divine and corrupt hunters undergo their own personality changes, those shifts may not be as extreme or uncontrollable as the ones suffered by so-called "independent" extremists — hunters who attain level-five edges by their own force of will.

LIVE FREE OR DIE

Some independent extremists are never approached by either corrupt or divine forces. Rather, they toil in isolation before breaking through to a new state. Perhaps they work covertly throughout their imbued existence and don't draw any kind of attention to themselves. Maybe they struggle so aggressively through their "careers" that the cosmic forces intuitively sense the futility of trying to draft these imbued. These "untouched" extremists are rare, though. Most would-be independents are approached from Above or Below at some point — and reject any offers of help or promises of power.

What makes someone spurn all aid, choosing to pursue her dream alone? Why would an extremist refuse the bargains of both the divine and corrupt and doom herself to a solitary struggle? Imagine you've dedicated yourself to a project (building a house, for argument's sake). You've designed the house yourself, drawing up the plans and acquiring the permits. This house means everything to you, and you're prepared to pay for everything and work as hard as necessary to make it all come together to your tastes. Perhaps you've had to hire help at different times, but they've followed your orders and worked to your specifications.

Now along comes a professional builder. She's prepared to lend her efforts to build the house, giving you labor, tools, materials and her experience at a reduced cost. There's just one catch: She needs to revise the plans. She says you've made a good start, but that you need to adopt her vision — and she wants to change the design.

This is your dream house. This is the biggest, most important thing in your life. Do you let someone else take control of it, even to a small degree? Is this going to be *your* house or *hers*?

Now extrapolate that scenario to absurd proportions — contending with monsters in a reality where the supernatural exists — and you have the mindset of an extremist hunter. The character devotes his life to his driving purpose, his great goal. It's the be-all and end-all of his existence. He brings insane determination to his agenda; no stable person could commit so completely.

Maybe he's so confident in his ability to reach his goal that he sees an offer of aid as an insult. Perhaps it's stubbornness; he's not going to relinquish control to something else, no matter what the benefits. The

STORYTELLER: ONE MASTER, TWO VOICES

You may be wondering what the difference is between an independent and divine extremist. After all, both ultimately work for the Ministers, whether at a distance or painfully close, and both receive their edges and second sight from the same source. The difference may seem small, but it's actually very important.

A divine character receives his power *directly* from the Ministers. Another, greater personality occupies part of the hunter's mind, directing and advising him, using him for its own ends.

By contrast, an independent extremist still obtains her power through the "usual channels," through the mechanisms put into place by the Messengers when all hunters are imbued. She continues to receive information from the Messengers, but it's still oblique and cryptic. The independent hunter is not manipulated or directed by another force. She makes her own choices based on her own deductions and insights. She finds her own way to battle evil, on her own terms and by her own standards, however skewed they may be. It's even possible that the Ministers don't *know* that an independent hunter has transcended her limitations. They lend her power as they would any of their chosen and are unaware of how she uses it.

To use a mundane parallel, think of the imbued as office employees. A divine hunter is given a great deal of power, but is constantly monitored and directed by his boss. The independent hunter rises slowly through the rank and file to obtain similar powers, but doesn't suffer the same degree of "micro-management." Her boss learns only what she reports, assuming she reports anything.

Independent extremists are very different from their divine equivalents, and there's no guarantee that the two have the same goals or that they even recognize each other as allies any longer.

hunter might not trust the motives of unidentifiable and perhaps alarmingly subtle or demanding forces, and he isn't about to set his goal aside for someone (or something) else.

At its core, this determination to stay the course and refuse all aid is a matter of identity. Devotion to the crusade is the foremost part of the hunter's personality. To change that goal even a little, to cede control or even take external advice would be like denying one's self.

A hunter with devotion this strong might resist the offers and temptations of a different or easier path. In doing so, he stands alone, and in his solitude, he might find that his own strength matches that which he rejected.

BREAKING THROUGH

The following rules provide a system for attaining a level-five edge as an independent extremist, showing the path from "mere" hunter to solitary giant. These rules were originally published in the *Hunter Players Guide* (p. 91) and are elaborated on here.

BECOMING

Transcending the boundaries of hunter power is a process, not something that happens instantaneously. Although a level-five edge can manifest suddenly, it emerges only after the extremist goes through a number of personality changes. This process happens in the course of the chronicle, not during downtime, and players who wish to obtain level-five edges for their characters must roleplay these changes.

To qualify for a level-five edge, your hunter must have a rating of 10 in her primary Virtue, and she must have a level-four edge in her creed path.

Personality: First, the hunter undergoes a major shift in both Nature and Demeanor as she foregoes who she was and devotes herself solely to the hunt. The character's Nature becomes one of Autocrat, Fanatic or Perfectionist. Her Demeanor also changes to match her Nature. At this stage, the hunter can no longer disguise her true self (or, indeed, understand why she would want to). There's no real correlation between a hunter's creed or Virtue and her new Nature. The change is dependent on the character as a person, not on her edges or capabilities.

If your character's Nature was one of these three Archetypes before attaining this height, it may remain so now and her Demeanor also changes, or she adopts one of the other two Archetypes. It's your call.

This change should not "just happen." As your hunter has grown in power and developed derange-

ments, she has changed and become more erratic. As a reaction to the rigors and demands of the hunt, she casts aside her old life and is consumed by a desire to fulfill an all-consuming mission (whatever it might be). Now think about how your character reacts to the events of the chronicle and this transition, and make the change in Nature at a point where it truly seems like a logical step for your hunter.

Example: When she was first imbued, Carol McIntyre was a volunteer nurse who cared about her patients, but she disguised her feelings behind a crusty, irritable exterior. In game terms, her Nature was Caregiver and her Demeanor was Curmudgeon. But that was a long time ago. As Carol draws closer to reaching her ultimate goal of destroying supernatural diseases, her personality changes to more closely suit her dedication and purpose.

If Carol becomes an Autocrat, her focus might be externalized into using others as assistants and tools. She might create a cabal of doctors and disease sufferers, ordering them to gather data from across the country. As a Fanatic, Carol might be a "medical terrorist," raiding hospitals for records and supplies without care for the consequences or the welfare of patients. Or she could become a Perfectionist, fixating on eradicating any danger of infection or disease afflicting her. In the last case, she adopts rituals and procedures that she believes will prevent her coming into contact with disease or the infected, giving her the sterile security she needs to fight contagion. Carol once cared about patients as people. Now they're just specimens and disease carriers to be ignored or eradicated. But surprisingly, Carol's allies find her easier to get along with now than she was before her behavior change. Now she's too obsessed with disease to bother with the "emotional armor" of insults, and too preoccupied with her objective to hide behind a bad temper any longer.

Some time should pass in your chronicle between your character's identity change and the manifestation of a level-five edge. This shouldn't just be downtime, but a period in which you can demonstrate your character's new personality. Ideally, a full story separates the Archetype change and the next step in the process.

Willpower: After an appropriate amount of time is spent playing your transforming character, the hunter may finally manifest her level-five edge. This emergence usually doesn't happen during a period of calm. It probably happens in a time of dire crisis, when your character desperately needs to do something to survive or save her plans from complete disaster. Perhaps a werewolf is about to disappear into thin air, carrying the infected tissue sample. Or zombies are about to

devour your character's long-lost brother, and your hunter is unarmed and too weak to fight. Or John Coaler puts a gun to your character's head and cocks the hammer. This is an important moment and should not be glossed over. It's as traumatic and life-changing as the imbuing that first put your character on the path to this moment.

Faced with disaster, the hunter makes a supreme, impossible effort of will, tearing down spiritual barriers and seizing the power that the Ministers sought to deny her. Mechanically, it's a simple process: Your character's *permanent* Willpower rating drops by five. In roleplaying terms, it's a lot more difficult — a supreme act of will, the disintegration of personality, a maelstrom of pain and effort that no normal human could withstand.

When your hunter's Willpower rating is reduced, she manifests a level-five edge along with a variety of other benefits, and some major drawbacks.

BENEFITS

Edge: Your character manifests a single level-five edge for her creed path. It could be from the *Hunter* rulebook or from the appropriate creed sourcebook. The Storyteller could also create a unique edge using any of these printed ones as examples. A hunter *cannot* obtain a level-five edge from any other creed path, even if she has 10 in the appropriate Virtue and a level-four edge from another path. (Say, a character has 10 Zeal and the level-four Judgment edge, and 10 Vision and the level-four Visionary edge. She's a Judge, however, so can gain only the level-five Judgment power.) Furthermore, a hunter can manifest only one level-five edge. She can never obtain another.

Patron: Your hunter receives the Patron Background at a rating of 5. If she already had the Background, its rating increases to 5. With the barriers around her soul shattered, your character is immersed in a constant, high-volume stream of information and guidance from the Heralds. This is useful, because it aids her in attaining her personal, solitary goal through messages, sensory input and visions. But it's also a terrible burden and distraction, like having a bullhorn blaring incomprehensible instructions in her ear. The hunter may find herself confused and disoriented at times, and so bombarded with information that she can't act.

Understand that the input received from Above through 5 Patron is like that any hunter would receive with such a Trait. Being an independent extremist simply makes your hunter more receptive to the Heralds' information. It doesn't put her at their beck and

call anymore than, say, a hunter with a low Virtue rating and 5 Patron. Your character must still make her own sense of the intelligence that the Messengers impart, she is now simply more receptive to it and perhaps victimized by it.

Storytellers in search of ideas on how to portray such high levels of Patron can find more advice and suggestions in **Hunter Book: Hermit**

Dedication: Your hunter becomes a living, breathing embodiment of her personal crusade. Virtually nothing can sway her from her course. Her personality and dedication are so strong that they can barely be altered, even by supernatural means. Your character is protected from supernatural powers that would affect her mind, emotions and body at all times, just as if second sight was active. While she always receives the protective elements of second sight, however, she receives none of its sensory benefits. In order for your hunter to see through illusions or to detect the supernatural at work, you must still spend a point of Conviction.

DRAWBACKS

Going it absolutely alone to gain amazing capabilities has its ramifications. Independent extremists pay a high price for defying the Powers That Be.

Virtues: When your hunter gains a level-five edge, her other Virtue ratings are frozen. You can no longer increase your hunter's other Virtues when she gains 10 points of Conviction. Your character is the living embodiment of her primary Virtue. She can no longer indulge in observing the others. If your hunter has unspent Virtue points gained previously, they *can* still be spent to gain new edges.

Disturbing Presence: After the imbuing, some hunters wonder if they're much different from the creatures they face. Indeed, as the imbued pursue the cause, they stray further and further from their former lives, delving deeper into madness. Evidence of inhumanity is even stronger among independents who forego their identities for the mission. Their very presence disturbs normal people, and other imbued. Different independents can manifest this manner in various ways. One may disregard ordinary people, fellow imbued and even "lowly" monsters altogether. Another may be utterly unable to observe social niceties and mores.

No matter how it manifests, this sense of obliviousness or inhumanity has a simple effect: It halves your character's Social dice pools (round all fractions down). This penalty is incurred whenever your character interacts with normal people and "lesser" imbued. The only

ones unaffected by her behavior are supernatural creatures, imbued with Virtue ratings of 7 or more, or hunters of the Hermit or Wayward creeds. These individuals that are themselves removed from everyday comprehension can be unperturbed by your extremist's behavior.

Compulsion: Beyond the derangements your character already suffers, an independent extremist's mind and perceptions are altered even further upon attaining a level-five edge. Your hunter is now the embodiment of her primary Virtue, and everything she sees and thinks is colored by that Trait. This personification of the mission can sometimes cause your character to be seized by a compulsion that cannot be denied — an urge that might coincide with her personal crusade or that could fly in the face of everything she wants to accomplish. Once per story, your hunter can be directed by the Storyteller to act or think in a certain way — and this directive *cannot* be denied, not even by spending Willpower. Extremists are erratic, unpredictable and appallingly powerful.

Merciful imbued (Innocents, Martyrs and Redeemers) can see monsters as deserving of forgiveness and understanding. Such a hunter might use her power to protect a creature from harm — even a dyed-in-the-wool monstrosity with no interest in anything but murder. The hunter might not be able to explain why she preserves the creature, or even bother to justify her actions to anyone. Once per story, the Storyteller can tell the player of a Merciful extremist that a creature has great potential and must be spared, no matter what the cost.

Hunters of the Vision creeds (Hermits, Visionaries and Waywards) can believe they know the truth in all circumstances. They might consider themselves the leaders of the imbued, destined to direct their fellow hunters. Anyone who says otherwise might be deluded or an enemy. Once per story, the Storyteller can tell you that your character knows something with absolute certainty, no matter how unlikely. This knowledge must be acted upon despite any opposition or argument. Perhaps he “realizes” that the true purpose of the imbued is to destroy each other, leaving only the strongest to ascend to Heaven and overthrow God. Or maybe he decides that members of a particular ethnic group are tainted by the supernatural and must be isolated for further study.

Zealous extremists (Avengers, Defenders and Judges) can be prone to wild acts of violence, without any apparent sign of provocation. These Zealots may punish others for apparently minor or nonexistent crimes, whether the victim is a monster, a hunter or a normal person. Once per story, the Storyteller can decree that a

given individual is an enemy or someone worthy of punishment and your character sets out to destroy the target. A Zealot may focus on a corrupt detective who sells drugs and guns to street gangs, but she's just as likely to decide that a pillar of the community, a man who was always kind to her, is actually a monstrous child-molesting degenerate who must be punished.

STORYTELLER: THE END OF THE LINE

Once a hunter receives a level-five edge, she typically begins the final act of her personal story. Little stands in the way of her reaching her personal goals. And little may stop her from dying, burning out or going completely insane in the process. The energy she wields can simply be too potent for the human body, mind and spirit to contain for long.

There is a simple rule that you can impose for these extremists, if you choose — *once a character receives a level-five edge, she has only one story left to tell before she leaves the chronicle*. That limitation not only reflects the last desperate efforts the character makes, and the stresses she imposes upon herself, but it also keeps what is an extremely powerful character from running amok in your game. A hunter of this magnitude allowed free reign in your chronicle could wreak widespread destruction amongst the supernatural, bestow unfathomable forgiveness upon monsters and break their hold on humanity, or see the world through to an earth-shattering fate. Maybe that's the kind of end you want for such a monumental character, and maybe it fits. But assuming that you want to hold onto some kind of recognizable setting in which to continue storytelling, it's recommended that a hunter with a level-five edge find her destiny in fairly short order. Yes, a different, ongoing, world-changing chronicle is yours to create if you like, but it's a challenge of your own making. Perhaps it's best to ask the player or troupe how they'd like events to progress, but not actually reveal what fate has in store for the character in question until it becomes cold reality.

If you give one of these extremists one last story to tell, it's perhaps best to focus on her attempting to fulfill her driving goal — that which may have arisen much earlier in her hunter career and has pushed her to these heights (or depths). If she succeeds in her quest and accomplishes her goal, her story may still be over. She might have nowhere left to go, nothing else that needs to be done. Now she can rest, meet her maker, relinquish her body or burn out like a dying star.

STORYTELLER: ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

The potential for a divine, corrupt or independent extremist — one who develops a level-five edge — is really cool and can make for some fun **Hunter** stories. But while surviving long enough to get a high Virtue rating is arduous enough, acquiring otherworldly power is a Herculean task. Your players might not be interested in taking their characters in that direction. According to the game rules, rising to the absolute height of power requires that a hunter's "career" follow a very precise route on which he gains specific edges. He must follow his creed path and all of his primary Virtue points must be dedicated to that calling. The player of a Redeemer must invest all his character's Mercy in Redemption and gain its edges, for example, rather than spend any Mercy to gain Innocence or Martyrdom powers. "Straying" from the path denies the character the greatest edges available to him — level four and now level five.

What if, however, you want to tell stories about characters with miraculous powers and none of the players' characters fit the bill? Players have spent primary Virtue points in different creed paths. Or maybe following such a strict path to power seems too restrictive. In that case, ignore the standing rule that a character must have a level-four edge in his creed path and a 10 primary Virtue rating to get a level-five edge. Maybe all he needs is a 10 Virtue rating, with a wide assortment of edges. It's a 10 Virtue that imposes so many derangements on a hunter, after all. If his head is just as messed up as a strict creed follower's, why can't they both gain the same kinds of capabilities?

So, feel free to invite characters to gain level five-edges (or impose such powers on hunters) after Virtues hit 10. Whether a hunter has four edges from one creed path or an assortment from a variety of paths may not matter to you. Telling cool stories is what matters, and allowing a wider array of imbued to go the high road, to go the low road or to find their own road allows for some great storytelling.

Two general kinds of story are appropriate for this final chapter. An *epic story* pushes the chronicle to its limits and lets the character go out in a blaze of glory. A *tragic story* allows the extremist to be undone by the blindness imposed by her insanity, emphasizing the horror of madness and the disastrous consequences of fanaticism.

EPIC STORIES

An epic story pulls out all the stops and raises the stakes of the chronicle, all the while keeping the spotlight on the extremist and his last great push toward achieving his goal. This story may take multiple chapters (game sessions) to tell and require great effort on all the hunters' parts, but it has the promise of a fantastic reward. The key to an epic story is to make it revolve around the last, most important milestone in the extremist's quest.

Let's return to Carol McIntyre. Her final story best focuses on her belief that diseases have a supernatural origin. The Storyteller decides to confront her with a supernatural virus, what she believes is the source of all monsters, and a threat that she can wipe out once and for all. Now to structure a lengthy, satisfying story on that premise.

Let's suppose that a virulent disease spreads among the citizens where Carol and her allies live. This virus resists treatment and some of its victims rise again as the walking dead. The first chapter of the story involves Carol and the hunters encountering zombies, realizing a virus is involved, and tracking down the source — a cult that worships death and deliberately infects people. In the next chapter, the hunters learn that the cult is widespread and they track it across the country to find its leader. He's a U.S. senator possessed by a powerful ghost, a creature that wants to infect the world. When the hunters finally get past the senator's followers, Carol can exorcise the ghost and destroy the virus — but she gives up her life in doing so.

That's an epic, satisfying story. It goes to amazing heights with widespread repercussions and it leaves the surviving hunters with new awareness. They've accomplished great things. It'll be hard for them to go back to taking down "ordinary" shamblers in local graveyards. But without Carol's support, what more can they do? If nothing else, the survivors are left with the encouraging knowledge that hunters *can* make a difference in the world.

TRAGIC STORIES

Hunter is a horror game, and many horror stories end badly. An extremist hunter is a lunatic. Some are the servants of supernatural powers. There's every possibility that in a hunter's madness and confusion, her quest takes a disastrous turn. She makes a horrific choice or decides that some heinous action must be performed for the greater good. An extremist might lead a crusade against an enemy that doesn't really exist, or decide to destroy every-

one in a small town because she believes them all to be corrupted by evil. Maybe there's a kernel of truth to her assumption or belief, but her choice of solutions means horrible loss and suffering, and the extremist can't see any alternatives.

In a tragic story, the extremist's quest ends badly. As in an epic story, the plot comprises the finale of her crusade, but her efforts are misguided and little good can come from her actions. There's no guarantee that Carol McIntyre is *correct* in her belief in supernatural diseases. What is certain is that she's paranoid and unstable, and capable of doing anything to wipe the "contagion" from the Earth. That obsession can easily lead to a tragic story in which she attacks an undeserving target or causes widespread harm.

In this kind of finale, Carol's allies might encounter a ghoul who works by day in a local hospital. Carol seizes on the discovery as proof that the hospital is a source of supernatural viruses. The ghoul must have been developing plagues for his undead master in the hospital's lab. Investigating, Carol finds the hospital is full of sick people, as one would expect. That tells her, however, that *everyone* in the building is tainted, that the whole hospital must be destroyed. When her uneasy allies try to make her see reason, she realizes they've been corrupted all along and drives them away. Carol invades the hospital, stalking and murdering patients and doctors. Her former friends must bring her down before more defenseless people die.

Tragic stories are tricky to run, especially when the primary character — the extremist — is likely to be moved into the role of antagonist to other players' characters. You might therefore propose such a climax before actually going through with it to make sure the player and the other troupe members are comfortable with that kind of resolution. You can also moderate absolute tragedy by allowing for small victories in a larger defeat. In the proposed story, Carol might discover that vampires are stealing from the hospital's blood supply, which is why their ghoul worked there. Carol doesn't achieve the grand, liberating victory she aspires for, but she does expose the blood's theft before her destruction.

For more advice on running tragic stories, read "Storytelling Tragedy" in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** (p. 166).

DEATH AND ENDINGS

It's quite possible that a player of an extremist, who has raised his character from humble beginnings

to an unimaginable end, will be satisfied with the passing of his hunter. A chronicle with a rewarding end may suit his character's rise, and his creation plays a central part in this final hunt. *All* the players may slap you on the back and tell you what a blast they had, and the player without a character may quickly make preparations for a new one to introduce into your game.

Some players find it hard to let go, though. They may want to keep playing their powerful extremists, no matter what, and could be irritated or upset if you suggest that such a character should be retired. Fortunately, the very nature of an extremist helps you wrap up the hunter's story. It's almost impossible for one of these people *not* to get in over his head in a final story.

The following suggestions help determine the final fate of an extremist, hopefully in a satisfying way. It's important that you don't simply rule that a hunter dies, or you don't take control of the character out of the player's hands. That's no fun for anyone. Be fair and let the player make the decisions — but don't let him ignore the uncontrollable pressures working on his character.

Divine: The Ministers don't care if their servant dies in the course of her duties. They only care that she gives her all and does their bidding in alleviating the supernatural threat that looms over the world. The messages and visions they send motivate her to go further and further with her mission, without the respites needed to heal or regain her wits. Add to this the irresistible compulsion of the hunter's core derangement and the divine extremist has little left to fulfill or offer but her one calling. In a final dramatic flourish, the limitless power of the Ministers might consume the extremist utterly, turning her into nothing but energy and ash.

Corrupt: The infernal constantly tries to weaken and corrupt the demonic-possessed hunter, encouraging or forcing him to perform unspeakable acts. Once the hunter reaches the final scene of his story, he may be exhausted and low on Willpower. That's when the demon strikes, attempting to wipe away the hunter's soul and possess him fully, gaining a body with which to have his way with the world. The hunter might get a Willpower roll to resist this absolute resignation, but the demon keeps trying and it eventually *will* succeed. Perhaps the hunter's last hope is to activate his second sight, shut out his possessor for a short while, and use that opportunity to end his own life to go out in quiet

penance or in a blaze of glory. If he fails, the demon assumes his body — and probably becomes a major enemy for remaining hunters in the chronicle. Such a character can be represented using the **Demon: The Fallen** rules.

Independent: These hunters are at the mercy of their derangements, and they urge themselves to fulfill their goals perhaps more so than any other extremists can. An independent hunter's Willpower rating is pitifully low, leaving her with little ability to restrain her mad impulses. On top of that, the hunter suffers compulsions inspired by her primary Virtue that she cannot possibly resist. By the final scene of her story, the hunter may be controlled completely by her ailments and impulses, pushing her into a final confrontation with the supernatural that she's unlikely to survive. And yet, that absolute commitment defines her and gives her death — and existence — meaning.

PROMINENT EXTREMIST'S

The following hunters started out like many imbued, terrified, confused and isolated. But when they proved to survive repeated encounters with inhuman things, they gained power over the creatures and found solace in pursuing personal quests against the supernatural. They might have lost their former lives to the creatures of the night, but they could make their mark upon their oppressors. In time, however, the pressures and demands of these quests took their toll and eroded these hunters' sanity. Yes, they won victories against the other side, but at what price? Now these imbued linger on, continuing to pursue their agendas, but often through a cloud of insanity, and with repercussions for monsters, ordinary people and other hunters. As Storyteller, you can introduce these characters to your chronicle as hunters' allies or enemies.

IBRAHIM NASIR

Originally, the choice to become a Muslim was a political decision, not a spiritual one for Ibrahim Nasir. His work as an activist for African-American rights was his passion, but he was just one man. Embracing Islam, changing his name, joining the Muslim Federation — these things were practical, measured decisions. Religion had nothing to do with them.

But even before his imbuing, Nasir began to realize his decision was not as calculated as he had believed. Islam spoke to something deep inside him — a desire for faith and to be part of a greater community. Over time, he grew

from being a pragmatic lobbyist to a passionate advocate of Islam for the African-American community.

His imbuing only energized him further. Nasir soon became a leader and important voice for Atlanta's imbued, giving his all to do what he increasingly believed was Allah's work. Through his connections and planning, hunters in Atlanta gained access to legal protection, coordination and resources. And if Nasir worked harder for African-American hunters than he did for ones of other races — well, that was justice. Someone had to go the extra mile for people like Tyrone Bellemey, a hunter imprisoned by a biased legal system — a system corrupted and controlled by the supernatural. Nasir gave everything he had to the Muslim Federation and the imbued, and he began to believe that success and a golden age were just around the corner.

That was before September 11th, 2001.

Suddenly America became a lot less friendly toward Muslims, whether black or Arabic. Ibrahim's friends became suspicious strangers, his contacts became distant. Even the imbued, the hunters he had worked for so tirelessly, kept him at arm's length, always watching for signs of treachery.

Nasir refused to let the distrust and stress get to him and threw himself further into his calling. He worked around the clock to protect the local imbued — with precious little thanks — and to improve the perception of Islam in the community. Soon the pressure and lack of sleep began to take its toll, and Nasir's mind frayed. He lashed out at other Federation members and ranted



about society's vendetta against blacks and Muslims. People stopped returning his calls.

Then Nasir began to dream about Nate Altman, a black man imprisoned for murder in Mississippi. Encouraged by dreams telling him that Altman was important, Nasir grew obsessed with rescuing the man. In the end, the hunter threw everything away — his career, freedom and sanity — to free Altman.

In the aftermath of the breakout, with his life in ruins, Nasir believed The Prophet came to him in a dream. He had been chosen to lead, and lead he must. Islam was under attack and needed a protector — someone to hold back the darkness that sought to snuff out the light of faith. Nasir awoke with a burning purpose and the power to make people listen and believe.

Nasir is still in hiding, hunted by the FBI for his part in Altman's escape. He moves from safehouse to safehouse, hidden by Islamic radicals, and he preaches his new gospel, his truth about the world. The evil force targeting Islam, he believes, is the same that has kept people oppressed for centuries, the same breed that runs the institutions that keep his people sick, broken and defeated.

Soon, Nasir believes, his army will rise up against the darkness. They shall have the weapons, the will and the power. And, he says, they shall have the blessing of the Creator.

JOHN COALER, A.K.A. RIGGER111

His whole life, no one ever did a fucking thing for John Coaler. Not his family, not his string of employers, and especially not the damn imbued.

As Rigger111, Coaler was a well-known — and unpopular — poster to hunter-net. He spoke his mind and didn't give a shit about rules, etiquette or manners. He knew none of that meant a damn in real life, in a world haunted by monsters. He finally crossed the line when he posted the names and details of other hunters to the list, imbued who "inconvenienced" him. Witness1 banned him from the list, and Coaler lost contact with the wider imbued community.

At first, that suited him just fine. He didn't want or need those weak assholes, anyway. But on his own, Coaler found himself no match for the monsters that came for him. He bailed on the shitty job he was holding down and tried to run, but Annabelle found him. A vampire with a taste for novel atrocities, Annabelle took control of Coaler's will when he was weak and made him her slave. Coaler was treated like

the bloodsucker's pet for months and was forced to degrade himself for her amusement.

And then Vassago rescued him.

When the monster crawled into his mind and made him an offer, Coaler didn't hesitate. With the demon's assistance, he escaped Annabelle. He was free again — but in reality, he had just changed one master for another.

Still carrying the emotional and mental scars of his torture — perhaps scars he's carried throughout his angry and frustrating life — Coaler wants nothing more than revenge. Revenge against the monsters, but more importantly, against the imbued. He put his life on the line time and again, and how did the fuckheads on hunter-net repay him? They left him to become a vampire's dog.

Now Coaler roams the United States, living hand to mouth. Vassago — the demonic force he calls "Boss" — directs him to find hunters and vampires, all in Coaler's hopes that he will get to destroy vampires who remind him of Annabelle, and to kill the hunter-net posters who betrayed him. In return, the Boss demands Coaler's services, fighting its enemies and protecting its interests. It also tries to force Coaler to perform acts of pointless murder and atrocity, all the better to wear down his will so that Vassago can possess his body permanently.

At first, Coaler didn't have a problem with the arrangement. He got his revenge, he killed monsters and weak chumps alike, and it wasn't like he cared about the killings the Boss demanded. But slowly, John



has begun to rebel against his new master. Even a bullying bastard like him draws a line, and the demon keeps trying to push him over it. More importantly, Coaler slowly realizes that killing the imbued doesn't make him any happier. It doesn't fill the emptiness inside him.

For now, Coaler continues to do the Boss' bidding and pursues his own vendetta, but each murder brings him a little closer to defiance. If he's lucky, that resistance might become a rebellion before Vassago devours his soul completely.

PROFILE

Attributes: Strength (Large) 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina (Tough) 4, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits (Cunning) 4

Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl (Hay-makers) 4, Computer 1, Crafts 2, Demolitions 1, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation (Bullying) 4, Might 3, Security 1, Stealth 1, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 3, Survival 3

Backgrounds: Grace Under Pressure 3, Iron-Will 2, Patron 5, Steel Nerves 3

Edges: (Defense) Ward, Rejuvenate, Brand, Champion, Channel

Vision: 1, **Zeal:** 10, **Conviction:** 5, **Willpower:** 5

Derangements: Anti-social Personality Disorder, Compulsive Aggressive, Manic-Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

MARY ELLEN KRAMER

A ragged, dirty, skinny woman travels America, following her own erratic impulses. From time to time, she connects with a group of imbued, helping them fight supernatural evil. But she knows that such dalliances are just a distraction, just the warm-up act, and she occasionally tells those who will listen about the *real* performance.

Mary Ellen knows the truth: The Messengers are the enemy.

She didn't always feel that way. Some days, she can still remember when she was first imbued, when she was still blind. Like a good puppet, she fought the monsters infesting her community. She tilted at windmills and had her share of little victories. Then one night she came home to find a monster stealing her children — a creature that tossed her aside like a rag doll.

When she came to in the hospital, her husband Michael told her that their house had burned down and that Ethan, Amber and Chloe were dead. But that was unacceptable to Mary Ellen. Such a reality *could not be*, and rather than believe it, she embraced madness with open arms.

Mary Ellen threw away the life she used to have — her husband, job, lifestyle and sanity — and dedicated herself to searching for her children. She relentlessly pursued every lead, every clue, even those that existed only in her warped mind. The very fight against the supernatural took second place to her obsession. Other monsters didn't really matter when her children were still out there.

Mary Ellen's allies began to regard her as a dangerous psychopath. She thought of other imbued as fools trying to keep a lid on utter chaos. She also began to grow increasingly suspicious of the motives behind the imbuing and the true purposes of the Messengers. If these beings truly *wanted* to fight evil, why did they leave the chosen in the dark? Why didn't they simply *tell* her where her children were instead of orchestrating meaningless puppet shows? The hunt and the Messengers were a lie, pointless to a woman living in a world defined by three words — *find my children*.

It took months of searching, months that pushed Mary Ellen further and further into the abyss, until she finally learned the truth. Her children were alive, and she would never see them again. Her husband Michael, the father of her children, had given them away to monsters, to creatures that claimed a connection to them closer than hers. The man she once loved had destroyed her. Her children had never been hers. They had always belonged to the darkness. *And the Messengers had let it happen.*



Such a revelation should have destroyed Mary Ellen. Perhaps it did. Her mind shattered, but in her madness she found a new subject for the revenge she sought: the Messengers. The unknown eyes in the sky that pulled strings and laughed while children turned into shadows. In Mary Ellen's madness, rage burned inside her and she found a way to harness it, to crack open the secrets of the Heralds and pull fire out of her very body.

Soon, that fire will consume her. Soon, but not yet. Not while she still has a job to do. Mary Ellen no longer searches for the children that can never be hers. Instead, she stokes the fire and works with other imbued in their puppet games. To those who will listen, who can see past her madness and the smoldering in her

eyes, she whispers what she knows to be true — she tells them to cut the strings.

PROFILE

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina (Tireless) 4, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

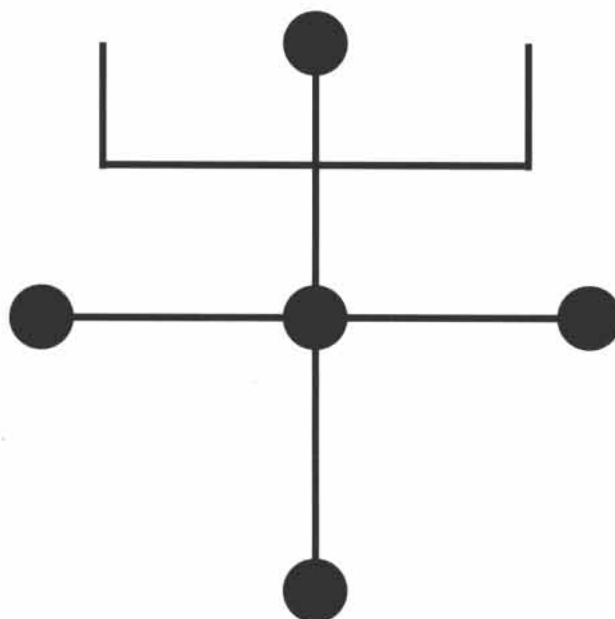
Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 2, Empathy 1, Endurance 3, Intuition 3, Melee 2, Performance 1, Security 2, Stealth 3, Survival 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Destiny 3, Patron 5

Edges: (Martyrdom) Demand, Witness; (Vengeance) Cleave, Trail, Smolder, Surge, Smite

Mercy: 3, **Zeal:** 10, **Conviction:** 8, **Willpower:** 3

Derangements: Dissociation, Manic-Depression, Obsessive/Compulsive, Schizophrenia





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