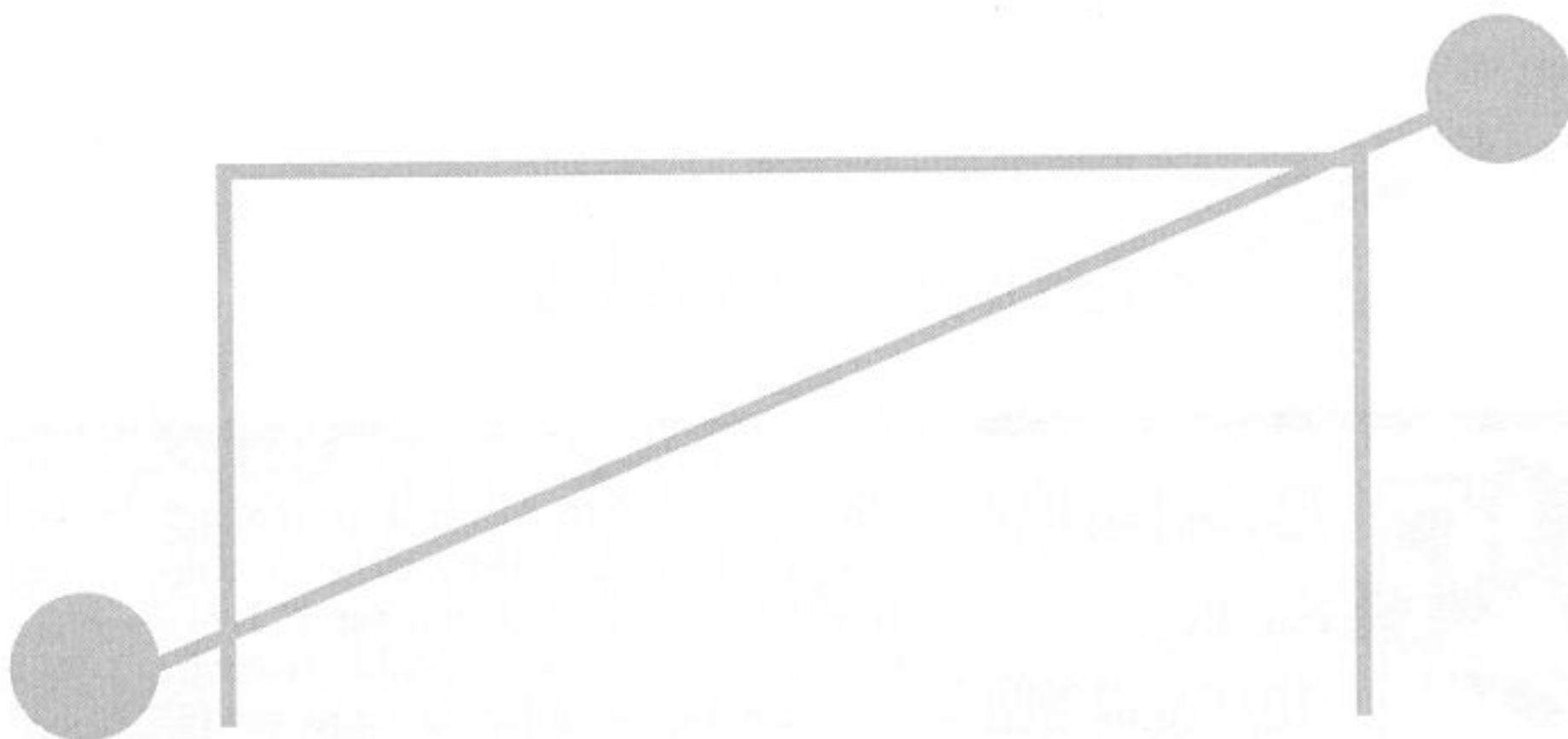


Nocturnal



An Enemy Book for Hunter: The Reckoning®

The Nocturnal



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PROLOGUE: SECRETS

"We are what our situations hand us; it's either sadness or euphoria."

I haven't left my car for more than a minute in the last four days. I eat from drive-through windows. I piss at gas stations. I sleep in parking lots, usually in front of 24-hour grocery stores.

Some kinda life I've hacked out, isn't it?

"I believe there is a time for meditation in cathedrals of our own."

I love this song. I wish I could turn it up, but then the lyrics might change. I don't think I'll be sitting here too long, anyway — just until her fare gets his bags into the cab.

I feel like a stalker. I glance up into the rear-view mirror. My beard's grown out patchy and uneven. My eyes are red-rimmed and baggy. My hair's shaggy. I normally buzz it, but there hasn't been time.

Over the last few weeks, I've come to know this city pretty well. Ever want to know the best ways to get around? Follow a cabbie. They know the shortcuts, the scenic routes, the back roads that no one ever takes. Of course,

I'm not using her as a tour guide. I'm using her as a rabbit.

I've always been comfortable in a car. When I was a kid, my father made a run between Cleveland and Toledo every weekend, visiting relatives. He took me along for company. The first thing he'd do when we pulled onto I-80 was find a "rabbit" — some dude cruising at 70 or so, preferably in a red car. Dad would tail him, figuring that the cops would pull over the other guy first, and we'd just drop down to 55 and keep on truckin'. Most of the time, it worked. Dad got busted on occasion, but he always laughed it off. Dad liked to laugh.

The cabbie pulls away from the curb and I follow after a minute, watching her taillights and hoping she won't notice me. She makes a right. I know where's she going — the airport. I lag back. I can take my time, take a different route, and at least that way I don't have to worry about her noticing me. She might recognize me, after all. She saved my life that night at the club. If she hasn't noticed me after four days, though, I'd be very surprised. Maybe she's called the police on me? No,

they'd have picked me up. More likely she assumes I'm one of them, and she's trying to figure out what to do. I really wish I could get out and talk to her, but if she knew she was marked, I'm pretty sure she'd go to ground. I can't force her hand — or theirs.



They don't respond well to being pushed. I found that out two months ago. I actually confronted one of them. It wasn't intentional. I just got angry. The noise subsided and I'd gone the whole day without a nosebleed, so I decided to treat myself, go to a club, have a drink, blah blah blah. I went to a club I'd been going to for years. The illusion of security, right? I knew that everything pre-Visitation was an illusion, but somehow this club I had gone to was sacrosanct. That turned out to be bullshit.

When I walked into the place, I thought the music sounded weird. It wasn't a song I knew, though, so I paid it no mind. It wasn't until I sat down and started a drink that the lyrics started coming clear — "YOU'VE COME HOME TO DEATH" and other cheerful thoughts. And then the throbbing behind my eyes, as it walked to the bar from the men's room, wiping its mouth for God's sake. It sat down next to me and the pain got worse. I didn't even know I was bleeding until the bartender handed me a napkin and asked if I was all right. I think I muttered something about allergies.

I was sitting there, next to it at the bar, dabbing at my nose with a napkin. I'd had nosebleeds around them before, and around some other folks that I guess were like me, folks I call listeners. But it had never been this bad. The guy was eyeing me the whole time, and I finally figured out that he wasn't watching me. He was watching the blood.

I felt sick. How the hell should I feel? How does a mouse feel when a cat sizes it up? I tried to get up enough courage to walk away, but I couldn't. I couldn't shake the feeling that the guy would jump me and bite me, even though I knew that was ridiculous. They like secrecy. The more people scoff at the existence of vampires, the more people they can feed on. I sat there at the bar thinking about that, thinking that a year ago this guy might have started up a conversation. Chatted me up. Played me at a game of darts. And then, just when I felt like I had a friend, he'd sink his fangs in and I'd be gone.

Normally, when I think about stuff like that I start to hyperventilate and end up passing out. But this time, I just got angry. I turned to the guy and held out the napkin. I actually fought through the pain and blood enough to speak.

"What? Is this what you want?" The thing got up and staggered back. I took it by surprise, I think. I should have run, but I pressed it. "Still thirsty? I know what you do. I know—" I think I meant to finish that sentence with "what you are," but I couldn't, because it slugged me. I'm not in the best of shape on a normal day, and with my nose gushing blood and one of them in my face, I'm near useless.



I pull into a gas station and park. I get out to stretch my legs. If the cabbie follows her pattern, she'll swing back to her own neighborhood after she dumps her fare. She's been driving all night, and she looked pretty wiped when she picked up that last guy. If they're going after her tonight, it'll be when she gets home, right before sunrise, right when she starts to feel safe.

They do that. Wait until you're someplace that you've been all your life, that you think of as "home." Then they watch you. It isn't enough to just kill you, because they're such paranoid fuckers. Instead, they have to know everything about you — and your family. I've got 'em beat, though. I don't have anybody they can use. But the cabbie — she's got family and friends. I've been watching her, after all. I know she's got a younger sister named Mona, and from conversations she's had, I think her father's still alive. I don't know how she feels about the other listeners she's met, but I get a sense that most of them are pissed off over the truth. The ones that go out and hunt. Not like me. I'm more like an observer.

Shit, call a spade a spade. I'm more like a voyeur. But it isn't because of any sick thrill. The last time I tried anything, I actually flushed out the cabbie and her friends. I'm probably the reason that thing at the club got away.



It hit me in the stomach and I doubled over. My nose was bleeding like a damned faucet, and I thought it had ruptured something when it punched me. The noise in my head made fighting back impossible. The music cut off suddenly, and I heard people running around, fighting, screaming. I honestly thought I was going to die, and I knew I had made a serious mistake in taunting the thing. They like to be silent, you know? When someone calls them out, they panic and it all gets loud for a while. When the noise in my head doubled and then quadrupled, I thought the thing had friends. Turns out it was the cabbie and her friends.

She pulled me toward her cab. I was struggling to get away — she must have thought I was panicking. Really, I was trying to escape the pain. She shoved me into the back seat and ran around to the driver's side. She probably meant to take me to the hospital. But outside the club, I was far enough away that my nose stopped bleeding and I could think straight. So I opened the door again and I ran to my own car. I doubt she got much of a look at me. But I remember her. I remember everything.



I get back into my car and turn up the music a notch. It's Billy Joel's earliest live album. For some reason, its lyrics are least likely to give me messages. I don't know why. I start heading toward the bridge. If she follows her usual routine — a really bad idea, I think — she'll cross the bridge and then I'll tail her home. If they want to hit her tonight, it'll be in a few hours.

I sit in a parking lot next the bridge and think about vampires. It's funny how nobody wants to say that

word. I can zone out and listen to conversations a block away — even see them happening — but the cabbie and her friends tend to say “rots” or “bloodsuckers.” Seems to me like the horror is... diminished somehow if you call them by their name. Secrecy’s given them such an edge for God knows how long. I wonder what they do besides prey on us. They’re obviously organized. Otherwise, killing one wouldn’t result in reprisals (which it definitely has in the cabbie’s case). Do they have grand balls, all dressed in Victorian clothes or three-piece suits? Do they live like animals in the dirty parts of the cities? So many superstitions filter up from the ghetto. Is there a reason for that?

I start to hyperventilate before I realize it. My breath catches in my throat. I reach to the back seat for my paper bag, but I can’t quite get it. I start to see stars. The music slows down and seems far away. I’m going to black out.

Just before I do, I see the cab come over the bridge. Billy is singing, “She’s got a way about her,” but as my head slumps on the steering wheel, it sounds like, “SHE’S GOING TO LIVE AN HOUR.”

I come to with a start. I can’t have been out long; the noise is still present. She must be close. My watch tells me it’s only been a few minutes. I pull out of the parking lot and try to follow the pain.



I got to my car and watched as the other listeners — maybe six of them — dragged the vampire from the club. The cabbie looked around for me, and then pulled something out of her trunk. It looked like she’d taken a sledgehammer and stuck a wooden spike on the end of it. Then I saw what she meant to do.

But she couldn’t go through with it. There were too many people around. The vampire was pissed. I zoned out and got a closer look. I could see its eyes turn this ugly pink-yellow color. Six strong men — the cabbie was the only woman — were holding onto it, but it actually lifted four of them off the ground for a second as it struggled. The listeners were talking about getting him to “the place,” but then one of them yelled, “We can’t, there’s too many people here!” Someone else yelled, “Abort!” They all scattered. The cabbie threw her hammer into the cab and took off. But the vampire looked really hard and saw her plates. He knew her.

The cops showed up right after that. I stayed put. They asked me some questions. I told them I got hit in the face when the fight started and didn’t know what happened. I tried to look pathetic. That isn’t hard for me. But the whole time, talking to them, I was just waiting for the throbbing to start. How many cops work night shifts? How many are slaves or vampires themselves?

I found “the place” a bit later. It was a dumpster they’d rigged. All the trash inside was soaked with gasoline. They were going to stake him, then burn him. And I fucked it up.



It’s hopeless. She’s moving away from me, and I don’t know in what direction or how fast. The only thing I can do is head for her neighborhood. I’m not far away now. Getting there only takes 30 minutes or so.

I hate this place. I hate the ghetto. I hate the dirty streets, the filth, the loud music, the weird feeling of danger all the time. What it must be to grow up in a place like this!

I pull up to the curb near her building, hoping that I’ll soon see headlights and get that throbbing behind my eyes. Then I can pull away, circle back and get my rabbit back in front of me. It could take some time, though. I turn off the music and zone out. I want to look around her apartment.

I drift up the stairs. There’s a man sleeping in a ragged armchair. Static shows on the TV — no cable, of course. From his age and features, I guess him to be the cabbie’s father. That hits me — it was one thing to know he was around. It’s another to see him sleeping quietly while his daughter is out risking her life to protect folks like him.

I don’t hear anything from the apartment except his snores and the TV. I start to drift back to myself. I’ll wait in the car until sunrise and then I’ll get some breakfast. Maybe nothing is going to happen tonight. Maybe the voice I heard was just part of the panic attack. It’s happened before.

I hear a door creak. My attention snaps back to the apartment. It’s quiet, but I know what I heard. I float through the place. It’s small, so it doesn’t take much effort. I find the bastard in the cabbie’s closet. It’s not a vampire. They rarely do their own dirty work. It’s a slave. I see them around sometimes. They look wrong, but I don’t know that they’re to blame. I think the vampires have a weird hold over them. Maybe some kind of hypnosis. I don’t know. But this guy has a gun on his hip and a big knife in his hand. And he’s not there for the father, because he’d have killed him by now. He’s there for the cabbie. And that fact alone scares me.

Secrecy, right? That’s what they want. They want to do whatever it is that they do without folks like us taking notice. So they won’t usually kill us right off the bat. They warn us. “Leave us alone or we’ll do your family.” But the cabbie has a history. She’s taken a few of them out. And she’s probably the one they know the most about, because one of them read her plates. They know where she lives, her routines — hell, they probably know more about her than I do. But they’re not giving her a warning. She’s scared them.

So they’re done playing with her. I can only imagine what they’ve already put her through. The constant fear of the ghetto — what’s that compared to the fear of coming home to find your father a bloodless corpse? She’s been swimming with sharks since day one, and suddenly I feel a great rush of shame. She’s swimming with sharks. I’m watching from shore.

I reach out to her. I don't know where she is, but I have to try and find her. I try to tell her that there's one of them in her home. That should bring her running.

I've only done this a few times. I concentrate on her, try to imagine her as she is right now, driving her cab somewhere nearby, looking forward to sleep. I picture the scars on her face, the calluses on her hands. I see myself sitting next to her in the cab. And I say, "Your father is in danger."

A gunshot snaps me back into the present — and my body. I don't think my message got through. My heart pounds as I look up at the apartment. I don't hear anything else. Gunshots in this neighborhood are pretty commonplace, I imagine, but I have no idea where it came from. I reach for the door handle. I stop. Images flash through my mind. Bloodless corpse. Oh, Jesus. I reach for the door handle. Stop. Family. Something runs down my face and I think I'm bleeding for a second, but I'm actually crying. I'm so fucking weak. Afraid. But I can't let that man die. He's not a rabbit. He's just... a father. Maybe he likes to laugh.

I reach for the door handle and this time I open it. I don't have any weapons, and I wouldn't know how to use them anyway. I don't carry a cell phone. I can't call for help. I lock my car and open the front door of the building. That lock is long gone, not surprisingly. I climb the stairs on legs made of pure lead. I try to breathe as

deeply as I can, because if I don't, I know I'll start to hyperventilate. I push the cabbie's door open. My eyes start throbbing immediately.

Her father is lying on the floor. He's not in his chair anymore. He must have heard something or got up and.... There's blood pooling under him. I think he's breathing. I spot a phone and head for it, thinking to get an ambulance here, but the slave finds me first.

My nose is bleeding before he touches me. He picks me up by my collar and shoves me against the wall. The noise and the throbbing nearly deafen me, but I hear what he says clearly enough: "I've heard of you, bleeder-boy."

I try to respond but only succeed in getting blood in my mouth. He smirks and drops me. I can't stand. I reach into my pocket for my only weapon. He grabs the seat of my pants and heaves me across the room. I land next to the cabbie's father.

"You really freaked out Case that night at the club," the slave says behind me. "He said that's never happened before. Someone chumping him out like that. He wants to meet you."

Oh, Jesus. I'd bleed to death, one way or another. I reach over and shake the father's shoulder a bit. He moans. Thank God for that.

The slave turns me over and squats over my chest. If he sits, I'm dead. I'll choke on my own blood. I finally find my voice. "Let him go."



"Huh?" it says.

"Let him go." The words hurt. My throat stings. I snort blood back into my sinuses and immediately cough. He gets up hurriedly, muttering something about his shoes. I spit blood on the floor. I grab the chair and pull myself up to standing. "Let him go," I repeat. "He's not part of this."

The slave shrugs. Its blood makes horrible squishing sounds in its veins. This is what I hear when I listen to slaves. It's as though their masters slow them down somehow. I don't know. It doesn't matter. I take my opportunity. I pull out my only weapon, my last chance—a tiny makeup mirror. I hold it in front of him and say, "Look at yourself."

I'm amazed I have the strength to do it. It's a real strain at the best of times. As weak as I am now, it's nothing short of a miracle. But it works. He looks at the mirror almost reflexively and sees what he really is.

He staggers back, crying and gibbering. I can't understand the words. He pushes himself into a corner, still babbling and I realize that he's reciting the Lord's Prayer. Instead of shame, for just a moment, I feel hope. Maybe I can help this man. Maybe he can be set free. I reach for the phone. I pick it up and hit 9, then 1....

And then comes the gunshot.

I drop like an anchor. My nose, sore and tender, starts bleeding again. I turn over on my side and see the cabbie with a gun in her hand. The slave is dead—he's got a bullet hole in his face. The phone is next to me. I press 1 again and pass out.



I wake up and immediately relish the feeling of inhaling without tasting blood. It's dark. I touch my face and feel that my cheeks are smooth. No hair. I listen but I don't hear hospital sounds. My body doesn't ache, and strangely enough, neither does my head. I sit up, fumble around a bit and finally find a lamp. I'm in a small room with no windows, on a bed with no sheets. The cabbie is sitting on

the edge of the bed. I must still be in her apartment. I expect my nose to start bleeding, but it doesn't. My eyes throb a bit, but it isn't too bad.

"Hi," I whisper. I realize I've never really spoken to her before.

"How's your nose?" she asks. Her tone is quiet, but her voice shakes slightly.

"Oh, it's fine. I didn't get hurt, really." I try to recall what happened and then I remember her father. "How's your..." I trail off. She's already shaking her head.

"In intensive care. Which we can't afford. He might live through it, but I don't know what to tell him." Her posture changes. I think she gets a little defensive. My head starts to hurt a bit more.

"I need to go," I stammer. "I'm sorry for what happened—"

"Sorry? You saved his life. Probably mine, too. I owe you."

I shake my head. "No. It was really..." I stop. I think I was going to say, "really my fault that it happened," but I'm afraid to. I know how quickly she killed that guy last night. Instead, I say, "It was really nothing. You'd have done the same for me." Then I'm up and looking for my clothes.

The body isn't on the floor anymore, but the police must not have come. If they had, I'd be in the hospital, too. I decide not to ask. People getting shot must be old news to her. I've never even held a gun.

"Hey," she says. "If you ever need help..."

"Yeah." I try to smile. It isn't easy.

"My name's Lupe."

I turn to her. I open my mouth to tell her my name, but it doesn't come. Finally I say, "Mine's Billy." She smiles at that. Guess I don't look much like a "Billy," but what the hell. "I'll see you around." I open the door, then turn. "So will they, you know." She nods. There are tears in her eyes. I close the door. I can't stand to see strong people cry.

I walk down the stairs and think about secrecy. It's what makes the bloodsuckers strong. They can get away with anything because nobody believes in them. Secrecy's their weapon. You'd think honesty and solidarity would be ours.

I can't even tell Lupe my name.



INTRODUCTION

*And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt
fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life*
— Deuteronomy 28:66

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

Vampires haunt the imagination as our deepest fears and desires — evil, lust, power and passion — given human-seeming form. They're devils, monsters and sometimes even the tragically cursed. They were once human, but now they rise by night to prey upon those who still breathe. The notion of these bloodsucking beasts pervades human culture and history. Indeed, the image of such beings has become so commonplace that the concept of vampires is almost synonymous with the term "monster." Notions of what the undead are, what they crave and what they are vulnerable to have worked themselves into the collective unconsciousness. We all think of the same things when the name "Dracula" comes to mind.

The same is true in the World of Darkness, a reality that's a mere shade removed from our own. Its people conjure up the same images of vampires that we do. That means hunters — people abruptly and painfully awakened to the truth of monsters' existence — also approach bloodsuckers' existence with the same preconceptions. But in the World of Darkness, vampires aren't a myth, legend or mere subconscious expression of inner desires. They're real. They've existed for

millennia. And because these beasts really do lurk in the shadows, what "understood" aspects of their nature are accurate? What images of them have been fabricated to keep their existence a secret? And what stories about them give an aware mortal just enough information to get himself killed when dealing with the undead?

The fact is the imbued know nothing and can take nothing for granted about vampires, their nature or their very existence. These beings have eluded humanity and pulled society's strings for so long that mortals comprehend little to nothing about what nightcrawlers are really like. Popular myths may have once derived from fact, maybe even facts known by living people in human history, such as during the Inquisition, but time and mortality have taken their toll on these precious morsels of wisdom such that they are now mere glimmers of what they were. And that fragmented information is all that hunters have to work with today. They're confronted with the reality of the undead and left to arm themselves against that horrifying revelation with only rumors and Hollywood portrayals.

At least, that's how hunters' experiences with vampires and forays against them may begin. If the chosen are lucky enough to survive such encounters, they may learn from their hard knocks which legends about blood-

suckers are real and which are patently false. From these trials, the imbued may glimpse something of what blood-suckers really are, how far their influence extends and what some of their vulnerabilities may be. But, of course, such discoveries are still only the tip of the iceberg. Beings as ancient as these predators must protect unimaginable secrets and partake in shadow plays that not even imbued eyes can witness. Indeed, if hunters can achieve any successes in saving or destroying vampires, maybe those creatures faced are only the weakest or "youngest" of their kind. Surely, the oldest and most deadly have existed for ages, possess immense power by virtue of their longevity and cunning, and put into motion plans that operate on levels inconceivable by any mortal given our grasp of time.

And yet, despite the insurmountable odds against them, what choice do the imbued have but to do *something* about the nightcrawlers and leeches that they spot in the streets, in nightclubs and in positions of mortal authority? Monsters are out there, stalking, murdering and corrupting unwitting people — loved ones. What choice do the chosen have but to confront and stand up to these children of the darkness, perhaps even at the cost of hunters' lives?

PIERCING THE NIGHT

Hunter: The Nocturnal explores hunters' ordeal when they face the mysteries and terror of vampires. This book illustrates the confusion, misunderstanding and outright paranoia that arises for both the chosen and undead when they discover and contend with each other. Ideally, **Nocturnal** helps you as a player understand the kinds of reactions to bloodsuckers, their minions, their capabilities and their influence that your imbued character may have. The book also answers many of the questions about bloodsuckers that plague players and hunters. Possible truths of nightcrawler origins and goals are revealed. Yet, the fact that these "disclosures" are made by hunters struggling through their own ignorance, and by the very things that hunters contend with makes such discoveries extremely dubious — as are all revelations in the World of Darkness. Hunters who take the "truth" with a grain of salt, or who look for truths within the truth, might just survive.

Nocturnal also helps Storytellers understand how the undead might respond to the hunter phenomenon and its *possible* threat. (Only "possible" because the human masses have been kept in the dark about vampire existence for centuries. So how is it that a handful of the cattle could suddenly know the truth and dare to use their knowledge against their betters?) Storytellers can also find all kinds of story ideas throughout. Lies and schemes perpetrated by the Other Side might lead hunters to weak or raging enemies that need to be dealt with, or to imbued self-discovery. Or, contact with the

unliving might lead the imbued into traps as leeches further their own agendas at the expense of the chosen.

The **Nocturnal** tells three stories about hunter and vampire interaction, each told in two parts.

Chapter 1: Sleeping with the Enemy reveals just how subversive and subtle bloodsuckers can be, and how firm a grasp they can have over almost any mortal institution or endeavor, all from a skewed yet realistic hunter perspective.

Chapter 2: Awakened from the Nightmare explores a possible hunter first contact with vampires, and the creatures' awareness of mortal failings and fears.

Chapter 3: Dead but Hopeful gives a hint of the vampire take on immortality, and on discovering and working with hunters, even if such mortals remain strange and misunderstood.

Chapter 4: The Nightmare Is Real is part two to "Sleeping with the Enemy" and shows the same events of manipulation and plotting from the bloodsucker point of view.

Chapter 5: A Nest of Vipers continues "Awakened from the Nightmare" and suggests how even hunters can become the pawns of the undead — to be used and discarded at the creatures' whim.

Chapter 6: Better Judgment completes the story begun in "Dead but Hopeful," following organized hunters' response to the existence of leeches and examining undead existence from the imbued perspective.

Chapter 7: Rules and Storytelling is intended for Storytellers alone. It offers tips and guidance on how to understand and portray the undead in your **Hunter** chronicle and embellishes upon information provided in the core rulebook and in the **Storytellers Companion**. This chapter (indeed, this whole book) operates under the tenets for depicting bloodsuckers explored in the article "Building Better Monsters" in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** (p. 47). That is, vampires don't have to be grotesque abominations or unfathomable puppet masters to terrify hunters and their players. The leeches shown here are frightening for their lingering ties to humanity — for the aspects of a soul to which they cling. They are only a step away from those imbued who are prepared to commit any act or make any sacrifice in the name of the hunt. These vampires are horrific not for what they are but for what they're prepared to do, and for how easy it would be for hunters to become metaphorical monsters of a similar sort.

Ultimately, this book is meant to allow you to capture the mood and feel of the undead as portrayed in **Vampire: The Masquerade**, without having to own that game. It certainly helps if you want to capture the breadth of vampires' existence, society and machinations in your chronicle, but it's not necessary. In fact, you could take all the information about leeches pre-

sented here and cast them any way you like, with an origin, purpose and unlife all of your own creation. That way, they're your antagonists alone and are nothing that players familiar with the other Storyteller games have ever seen before. It's your chronicle.

SOURCE MATERIALS

A lot of stuff about heroic people who deal with the undead (usually in a manner that proves fatal to some or all participants) is available. We've tried to avoid silly or over-the-top sources in compiling this list. **Hunter** is about regular folks facing a suddenly monstrous world. They're scared, yet they do something anyway. We've tried to pick out movies and books that emphasize that very real resolve and bravery — **Hunter's** theme.

Tomb of Dracula — The Marvel comic from the 1970s. Check out Gene Colan's art for its own sake. The comic focuses on Dracula, the biggest vampire stereotype around, but also details the mortals who hunt him. Ultimately, all the characters — Dracula included — are heroes (or dark heroes), but their antagonism endures nevertheless.

Lust for Blood: The Consuming Story of Vampires, by Olga Hoyt. A good resource for folks who want to learn about the history of vampires in folklore (not just European) and literature.

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*. A no-brainer. These books make vampires sexy in a modern context, and the historical flashbacks are very evocative.

J. Sheridan LeFanu's "Carmilla." Here's how you exist for centuries: by hiding and reinventing yourself. This story is also very sensual and spooky.

Frederick Cowles' "The Vampire of Kaldenstein." What a bunch of monstrous degenerates these guys are!

John Polidori's "The Vampyre: A Tale." Despite the aftermath of lace and capes, this story pretty much establishes the core ideals of the modern vampire.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Duh.

Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*. Unpleasant, seedy characters. Swap out the heroin for blood and poof! Instant vampires! The movie also stands as a good film translation, a rarity.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. An excellent book, stylistically (Fitzgerald describes his characters through their actions, showing rather than

telling), and its social commentary is certainly applicable to vampire society.

Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. A nest of high-society vipers and what they do when things go awry — exactly what happens when hunters throw a wrench into undead schemes.

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Hell's Angels*. Welcome to what could easily be the wild, unfettered side of vampire existence. The *Fear and Loathing* movie is actually better than you heard.

John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Very Southern, but also very gothic in the sense that **Vampire** illustrates: rife with corruption and rotten from within.

Blade. Um, see, there are these 13 cla— er, houses, right? And they have mortal minions called ghoul— uh, familiars. Oh well. The vampires in *Blade* are certainly very sexy and ultra-modern-hip-cool, plus Steven Dorff's performance is excellent. Also, New Order is on the soundtrack and can be heard during the phenomenal opening scene, so you can't go wrong.

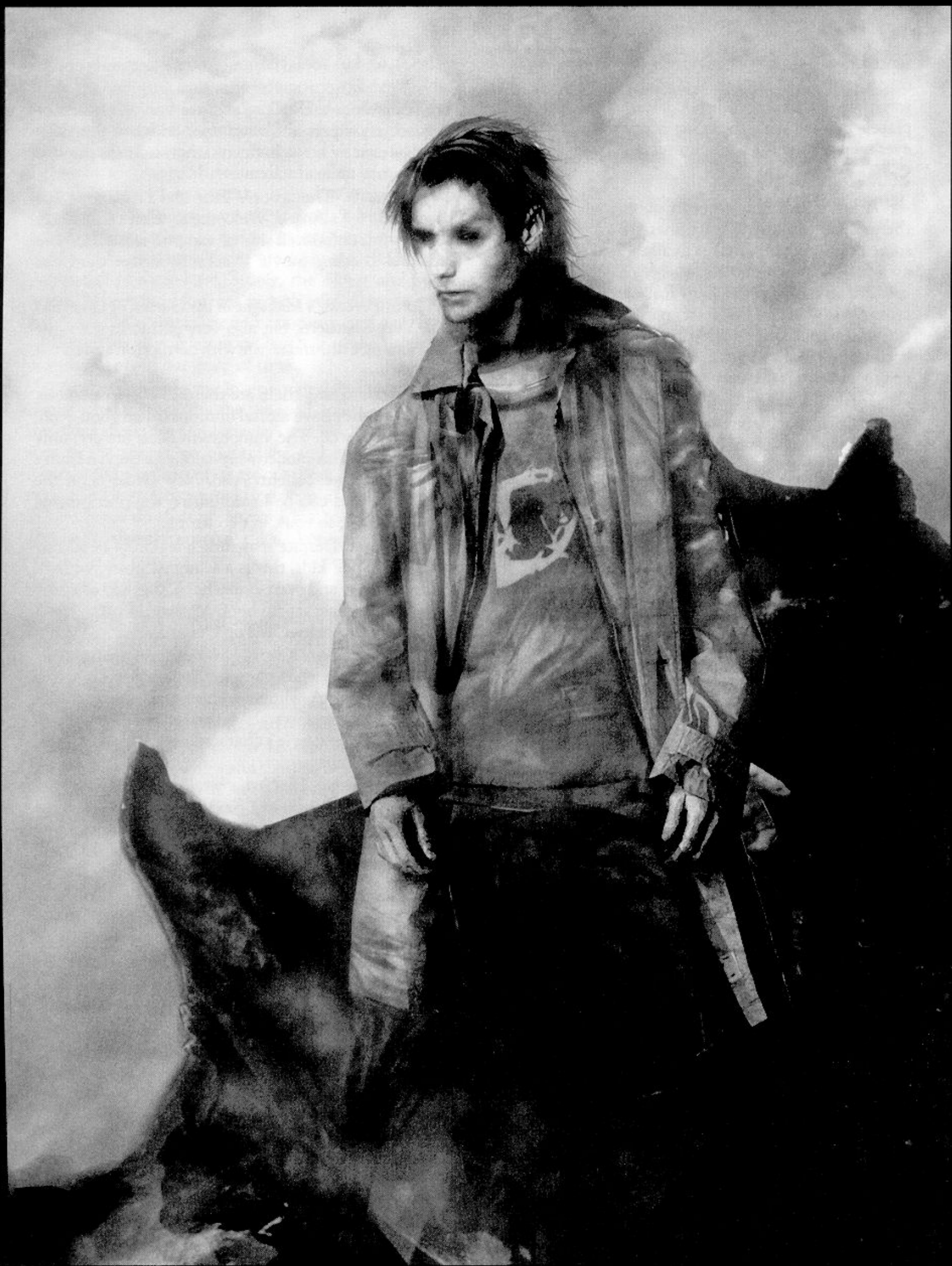
The Crow. Despite spawning a legion of fiendishly made-up LARP kids, this is a scummy, noisy, vibrant, violent, druggy and even somewhat gothic hell of a good time, with kickass sets to boot. Michael Wincott gives a sterling performance as Top Dollar.

The Replacement Killers — Mainly the opening scene. You can bet that when vampires walk into a nightclub and some grade-A whup-ass starts to happen, there's going to be some Crystal Method playing *really loud*. And most of the movie's characters are World of Darkness-style scumbags.

The Godfather, *The Godfather: Part II* and *Goodfellas*. Treachery! Greed! Death! Sex! If you don't like these movies, there's something wrong with you. Every element of these movies can be adapted to suit **Hunter** and to capture various aspects of vampire unlife.

The Hunger. A bit dated, but excellent nonetheless. Two creepy vampires ply their trade in New York as Bauhaus leers at the camera.

John Carpenter's *Vampires*. Again, the strongest part of the movie is its opening scene; it gets kinda action-campy afterward. That opening scene is *quality*, though, and gives an unsettling feeling for a "nest" of vampires. The head vampire, Valek, is *really* sinister in an over-the-top "bad dude" way.



CHAPTER 1: SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

Whosoever he be that doth rebel against thy commandment, and will not hearken unto thy words in all that thou commandest him, he shall be put to death

— Joshua 1:18

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9

Anybody who tells you quitting junk is no big deal is a goddamn liar. Quitting is the easy part — you've got about three days worth of pissing, shitting and puking and maybe a hard-assed week or two of depression afterward. The hard part is getting back into a world that doesn't want you. You can lie about it, but anybody who gives a damn is going to check you out, and you can bet that your 13 counts of petty theft and subsequent suspended sentences in lieu of methadone treatment are going to turn up.

"Have you ever been convicted?"

"Why, yes. Thirteen counts of stealing shit to support my heroin habit, sir. Is that going to affect my chances of getting the job?"

"Um... no. We're an equal-opportunity employer. We don't care about things like that. Don't let the door hit you on the ass on your way out."

And on top of it, I have to keep this "recovery log" to show my probation officer and counselor that I'm serious about getting better. It's like I'm 14 again and I have to prove I'm learning something in health class. Dear Mrs. Finnegan: I promise to wear a condom when I go up in Heather Cole this weekend.

I don't expect a lot of sympathy. I mean, I did all the stuff I was accused of, and more. My decision and all that. The point here is that it would be easier just to give up. Get back on the skag and catch AIDS from a dirty needle or get picked up for possession and catch AIDS from my cellmate in lockup. Or maybe just die on the junk. I hear that's still possible these days. Anyway, I'm trying.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11

I won't be working in the men's department of Macy's at Herald Square. I won't be a bank teller, record shop employee, hotel bellman or pizza jock anywhere near Herald Square. Nothing like getting job-refusal postcards from everybody in one day to really make you feel like a loser. Maybe Lou Reed needs a guitar understudy.

I have two interviews today. We'll see what happens. It's getting kind of pathetic. Maybe I'll become a bum. I hope the bum's local hands out pay stubs so I can prove I'm working.

MONDAY, JANUARY 15

A janitor. I'm a janitor. I'm not even the head janitor. I'm the one white guy in a bunch of Mexicans whose job it is to clean up the shit other white guys leave

lying around. Two years ago I could have been one of those white guys. But now I'm one of the Mexicans.

The company's one of the contractors working for the Richard Meier architecture group. I'm on the night detail — the shit shift. Nine to five, but not the button-down nine to five. More like the sweeping up nine to five. I guess they need someone to make sure the place is clean after they leave and right before they get in. It sounds like they come in pretty early, is why I say. All those contracting types who live in Jersey probably want to miss all the traffic and take lunch at hours when they don't have to fight the power-suits for deli space. Still, it takes me back to my days of substance abuse. Those were the prime hours for creeping around town, stealing radios out of cars and cooking up junk in God knows whose one bedroom apartment with no doors. You see some pretty unsettling things in those hours. I hope the steady employment will keep that sort of weirdness to a minimum. Still, I'm a bit worried. Not everybody from the old skag crew took the dive at the same time as me, and some didn't get picked up at all. That means they're still out there. And that means I still have a line on junk, if I break down and decide I need another hit to keep going.

Hopefully the Mexicans will help me keep an eye out for myself. They'll report me if I start falling down (that is, shooting up) on the job. None of them speak any English, anyway, so it's not like they'll have heard about my sketchy history. I don't think I could take that. It's a dark day when Mexicans can look down on you.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31

Okay, so they're not Mexicans. Maybe one or two are, but most of the night crew is Puerto Rican, with a handful of Dominicans and some Cuban refugees I guess. I figured that out from listening in on their conversations. The old high school Spanish lessons were enough to let me know that they weren't talking about me, which gave me more respect for them. Sure, that's the junkie's curse, thinking that just because your selfish ass is at the center of your own world it's got to be at the center of everyone else's, too. It really gave me some grounding in humility. What do they care about this white boy, so long as he does his job and doesn't bring the rest of the crew down with him?

I actually hit it off with a few of the people on my detail, mostly because we're creeped out by the same night shift boss for the architect's side of things. We get along fine with the security guys, and even the electricians and plumbers are good guys, what with us night shifters just trying to get paid. But the Meier guy gives everyone the creeps. His name is Arturo, so I thought he was maybe on terms with the Mexicans, but that's just my old prejudices coming out again. Oh, and that they're not all Mexicans.

He's a weird guy. He never blinks. He has this weird way of moving — like every step he takes is an effort, but

he makes it look casual. Almost like when you see him move, he wants you to know he has a purpose but it's none of your business. It's also unsettling that he watches us. I mean, I never figured that any of the white collar types ever really gave a fuck about the people emptying their trash cans or shining their shoes. Maybe that's more prejudice (or reverse prejudice? I don't know). Maybe it's junkie empathy. But I'm a janitor, for God's sake, so why should the most important guy on the night crew care about what I'm doing?

Anyway, that's what brought me and some of the others together. Arturo walked by, hard look on his face, cocking an eyebrow at us. When he left the room, Ynez said something like, "There goes the shark." Everybody had a good laugh, including me, because I understood the joke, and they all looked at me. At first I thought it was because they were worried that I had been eavesdropping on them all along, but it was because they didn't know I spoke any Spanish. Or maybe they thought I was deaf or mute or something. Anyway, Hector said, "So you notice it, too," this time in English, and I answered him that, yeah, Arturo's a real piece of work. Then I did an imitation of him walking. I bugged my eyes out like I was watching everyone. We all had another good laugh at the architect's expense. It was brief, and we all got back to work pretty quickly, but it was one of those common ground situations that just make you feel good. It wasn't really like I needed to be accepted by these people, but it let me know that I wasn't alone, if only for a little while. That's a good feeling when you don't really have a lot of trust coming your way.

Speaking of which, god damn I want a hit.

After the shift that morning, Hector and I caught some breakfast on the way to the train. That's how I figured out where everyone came from. He told me who came from where, who lived where, who had families and who was single — the whole sort of "welcome to the team" shit that no one really bothered to give me before. I told him a little about myself — nothing about the drugs, but about my folks' place in Stuyvesant Town and my original plans to become a teacher until stuff in my personal life made it impossible for me to go to school. Hector just shook his head and said that it was a shame that I'd lost the opportunity. So many people living in the city don't even get that kind of opportunity in the first place, he said. His own father had a successful building company in Mexico (he was one of the legitimate Mexicans in the crew). When the family saved enough money to chase the American Dream, it turned out that the only place they could rent a place was in East Harlem. Hector was even one of the few naturalized Mexicans in the city, but it turns out that the only place most of the Latin population can find work is in service or hospitality.

That's fucked up. I consciously chose to make my place at the bottom. Hector had it put on him. I headed

home that night feeling really guilty, and for some reason I couldn't help but think of Thomas Arturo. Kind of like I blamed him for Hector's situation.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

Things have been getting better, and worse.

First off, my cravings are way down. If I think about heroin, I start feeling like I could use another shot, but if I don't pay it too much attention, it just sits on the back burner. I don't think you can ever be a 100% "cured," but you can get better and I feel like that's happening. I'm off the methadone, now, too, and just trying to make it day to day. This Sunday, I woke up at 9:30 in the morning. I didn't even know Sunday had a 9:30.

That's the good news. The bad news is that something's definitely up with Arturo and it's been getting in the way of me doing my job. I just can't be near the guy. You know how sometimes a dog just raises its hackles for no reason? It just starts bristling and snarling? I feel that way around Arturo. I mean, I'm not threatening him or baring my teeth or any crazy shit like that, but the more I have to be around him, the more I can just feel that he's weird.

It's fucked up. I can't quit, because they'll put me in jail. The custodial company has a contract with Meier through till the building is finished, and then they have an option to continue the service. The guy in charge of our account with Meier, Mr. Rifkind, has obviously worked with the company (or maybe Arturo) before, because he's always telling us how important it is to make sure that work is done well and how much this account means to Brightways Custodial Services. I'd say he's so damn jolly about it because he never has to spend time in the "shark tank," which is what we call the site when Arturo's on. It's not that, though, because I've seen Rifkind and Arturo talking and they get along just fine. We pretty much scuttle around the place and run whenever we feel Arturo coming, like cockroaches scatter when you turn on the light.

It's hard to pinpoint what it is — there's just something wrong with the guy. I've never been locked in a room with a lion, but I have this weird idea that it wouldn't be much different. He has an edge about him, and it means trouble. I mean, I'm no fighter, but I've had to take care of myself before, and that's why it's so strange that I get this heavy vibe off this guy. It makes me laugh when I'm away and thinking about it, but there's absolutely nothing funny about it when I'm trapped on the site with him.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

It's fucking cold outside, but I went over to Hector's house today. It's his daughter's birthday. She's six. It was nice, with an ungodly amount of food that Hector's wife Clara made, a bunch of kids from around their place, and even a pinyata. I've never seen that sort of thing for real

before. All the adults from the apartments came over to celebrate, too, and to have a few drinks. I really admire Hector. He busts his ass to get his work done and while I'm sure he makes more money than me (he's been there longer), he's not rich. He takes care of his family, though. Me, I spend my money on whisky and dirty magazines, so there you go. I think Clara works at the Mark Hotel, but neither one of them is taking down big figures and they just sacrifice so much so their kid can have a good life. I've still got selfishness in spades — old habits die hard — and I can't imagine saving a dime from one check to the next. I'm still not confident enough to date (well, anyone other than a jabber, that is, but I don't want to risk falling back into the scene). Seeing how happy Hector and his family are gives me hope.

THURSDAY, MARCH 8

Holy shit. Rosendo died tonight. He was one of the Cubans. I'm not sure about all the details, but I know he fell down the elevator shaft, down 15 floors. I was doing the windows on nine when I heard the crash. It was weird. He didn't scream on the way down or anything. There's no actual elevators in those shafts right now, just the ones the builders are using, so I don't even know what he was doing in there. The only reason I even know it was him was because a bunch of us heard the racket and ran down to the lobby.

It was one of the most disgusting things I'd ever seen. I always figured that you'd lose a lot more blood than that, but it wasn't some big, messy splatter. He looked like a rag doll down there, all folded up over himself. I was glad I couldn't see his face. I don't think I could have handled it.

The weirdest part, though, wasn't why it happened. It was the way the police handled it. Arturo was on duty and the cops talked to him. That's fair enough, I guess, because there weren't any real witnesses who saw what happened. Still, it was strange how quick the police came and went. The ambulance loaded up Rosendo's body, the cops took a statement from Arturo and then it was all over. The whole thing must have wrapped up in less than 20 minutes. I guess nobody cares when some Cuban takes a dive in New York. I'm sure they're all thinking, "It's not like there aren't two million others to take his place."

We all got the rest of the night off, but that was cold comfort, if at all. I needed a drink pretty bad. Things shook me up more than I could admit at the time, maybe because of shock. I mean, I'm still amazed now that it's the next day, but I've got a splitting fucking headache from my hangover. I'm going to talk to Mr. Rifkind tonight and see what the deal was. Maybe they'll set up some kind of memorial that I can give some money to. I know he had an ex-wife and that their boy lived with her. That's got to fuck you up, to hear about something



like that happening to your ex-husband. Then again, I don't know his ex from Adam. Hell, maybe she set the whole thing up as an insurance scam. Weirder shit has happened in New York City.

FRIDAY, MARCH 9

And I thought yesterday was strange. Tonight was downright bizarre.

The first thing that happened once everyone clocked in was Rifkind gathered us all up and made some kind of statement about Rosendo's death. It was almost like a press release or a media statement or something. He reminded us that accidents happen in the work place and that it's up to each and every one of us to make sure we're following proper safety procedures. Most of them come down to common sense, blah blah blah... but he never really mentioned what a tragedy it was, just our duty not to have shit like that happen to us.

He also announced that everyone would have \$50 worth of bonus money when we picked up our pay that night. The best part was that it wasn't going to be on our checks — it was \$50 cash. No taxes. No fees. I'm sure it worked on some people, but I'm not so stupid that I don't know blood money when I see it. This was our bribe to shut the hell up about the whole deal if anybody came sniffing around.

I looked at Hector but he didn't meet my eyes. He knew I was looking at him.

I left work early, claiming that I was sick. Mr. Rifkind put his hand on my shoulder when I picked up my check and nodded his head. "I know what you mean, son," he said, with a smile that I'm sure was supposed to look like compassion or consolation. What a bastard.

I took the 50 and scored. I needed it. Fuck it. I don't have to work again until Monday. Maybe I shouldn't have written that down in here. Then again, this is supposed to be a recovery journal, right? I'm allowed to fail here and there.

Well, it doesn't matter, because the junk was like poison. I had been out of touch for too long and couldn't get anyone who was still in the scene to talk to me, so I had to buy fucking pills and crush them up before cooking them. It was a total fucking ghetto scene. I could see the garbage in the hypo as I spiked myself. Low rent junkie skag. I just knew that some bit of that crap was going to lodge in my heart or tear open a vein or something and I was going to die in my apartment. Still, it worked like a charm and I checked out. I'm only now able to hold my hand still enough to write this. Falling off the wagon and all that, or maybe onto it. I never really understood what meant what.

MONDAY, MARCH 12

Something's up.

We had another meeting at the start of the shift tonight. All I wanted to do was clean the bathrooms,

because I came off a hard fucking weekend. The junk wrecked me. I was sick all Saturday and Sunday and only started feeling functional around Monday noonish. It even made me start wondering if what went on was real. I mean, I can't particularly trust myself. I'm not supposed to be doing junk, but then the moment things start to get freaky, I'm back with the Velvet Underground.

That's what made the meeting all the more strange. I halfway believed that I dreamed everything up to that point. Then Rifkind said that we'd be taking up a memorial fund, and that Brightways was going to send a wreath to Rosendo's family. He was being sent back to Puerto Rico where he could be buried in his native land, seeing as how he was never naturalized and most of his biological family lived there.

Bullshit. Rosendo was Cuban. Either Rifkind's the most insensitive fucking bigot who's ever ordered a bunch of spics to empty garbage cans, or something's going on that's not entirely on the up and up.

I thought I might be cracking up again, so I caught up with Hector on the way home. I thought that maybe I didn't remember Rosendo's home right, or maybe his family was split between two countries. Fuck, I was looking for any excuse to make sense of it. There's the junky selfishness again. The guy's dead and I'm trying to sort it all out so I feel better. Hector didn't want to talk about it, and he kept looking away like he did in the conference room last Friday. He said that he felt the same way I did, that Rosendo's family would be embarrassed if they found out that Rifkind thought he was Puerto Rican.

I can't say that I understand that, but it confirmed something I hadn't completely understood. Even if it was a mistake, somebody in payroll or benefits would have caught it.

TUESDAY, MARCH 13

Hector got fired tonight. Arturo was on the site. Rifkind called Hector in for a word and next thing I saw (I was doing the drywall bins on nine — I better learn to avoid that floor) was him walking off the site and closing the chain-link gate behind him. I called down to him and he looked up, but when he saw it was me, he just turned away.

I don't know what he's going to do. I mean, he's a stand up guy. He won't have any problems finding work, but I mean, what's he going to do about Rosendo? The guy knows something is going on. He must have said something to Rifkind last night or complained to the main office. Instead of fixing the situation, they fired him. What kind of message is that supposed to send to the rest of us?

I need... no, I need a drink. I can hang on until the end of the shift. All I have to do is ride the train home and pour myself a nice shot.

Hell, I don't even know what I'm talking about. Maybe Hector complained about some OSHA code or something and it was easier to fire him than fix the problem. Maybe they were hoping nobody else noticed it. I don't know. Maybe Hector was just putting on a front of being a good guy and they caught him filing crooked insurance papers. Jesus, maybe they found dope in his locker. I don't know. Maybe he quit instead of getting fired.

Still, it's strange. One guy dies and another gets a pink slip. Nobody else is going to say anything. They're so scared they'll lose their jobs. I'm not going to speak up. I mean, it's sad about Rosendo, but there's not really anything I can do about it, is there?

I heard Arturo talking to Rifkind while I was putting away the cart, right at the end of the shift. Rifkind said that everything had been taken care of. Hector's employment was terminated and he was made to know in no uncertain terms... something something something. I know I maybe should have hung around more to find out what was going on, but, hey, how many people does it take before the lesson sinks in?

Ynez wouldn't let me have any of her homemade gingersnaps. She said my hands were dirty. I have no idea what that means, but something tells me that I'm walking a fine line here. The rest of the Latinos aren't giving off any personal warmth in my direction and I've seen what the company will do if I step out of line. If I'm fired, I go to jail. If I quit, I go to jail. If the crew rats me out for anything, I go to jail. If I hang around and do something... see, that's it. I don't even know what I could do, but it's obvious that something's up.

Then it occurred to me: Rosendo saw something. I don't know what, but the pieces fit together. Maybe the shark was doing something he wasn't supposed to, or maybe it was Rifkind. Nobody falls down an elevator shaft that doesn't have an elevator in it. There's no reason to even be in the shaft. Something happened to Rosendo. Somebody did that to him. Hector called them on it and they sacked him because they could. It's not like the police are going to believe some crazy Mexican making up stories about bosses shoving janitors down elevator shafts. The guy's been fired. He obviously bears a grudge. Maybe he even tried to get a few bribes and when the company refused to play his game, they fired him. What's the motive?

I don't think this is junkie paranoia. Even if it is, it doesn't mean I'm wrong. Damn, the whole thing gives me a feeling that the walls are closing in on me. What's today, Tuesday? I can duck out tomorrow night. I need to take this edge off. I'll just buy 20's worth and come up in time for a half-shift tomorrow. I'll tell them I've got to bring something to my mother. I don't know. I

need to handle this and not get sent back to jail or to the bottom of an elevator shaft.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14

That all went wrong. I only had 20 or maybe 30 bucks worth. Shot some of it. It was actually really pure. Not like that crap Jimmy usually has (note to probate officer: Names have been changed to protect the guilty). The stuff that comes up from Mexico or that crosses the pond from Pakistan through Liverpool.

Check me out. I'm a gourmet heroin connoisseur. Unfortunately, I'm a homeless heroin connoisseur. I guess the stuff I got from Jimmy was so pure that one hit sent me under. I passed out. I guess the landlady came in for some reason (stupid nosy Jew) and found me there on my mattress. My gear was all over the floor — spoon, matches, hypo, powder — and she kicked me until I woke up and told me to get out.

Now that I say it, I don't even know that she's a Jew. Maybe she's Armenian or something. Whatever. She threw my ass out in the street. Luckily, I don't have anything worth stealing. I shoved all my clothes and this dirty Brightways uniform into my bag, and took my whisky bottle and a handful of CDs with my Discman. All I left was the mattress, some shampoo and a broken TV.

Anyway, I took all my stuff to the Brightways office and shoved it all in my locker. I felt like shit. The junk was still in me by the time I got my crap and left the building, and I was six hours early for my shift. Colleen at the counter looked at me weird but I told her I had something to drop off in town before I started my shift and didn't want to be late. Six hours to kill before my eight hours of swimming with the shark.

Maybe I can find an apartment in six hours.

This is where the casual user thinks to himself, "Why didn't he just go stay with his parents?" Well, listen to this casual user: When you shoot heroin and go to jail and your parents have to bail you out and you report to your probation officer and, most important, not only do you still use heroin, but you're on it right now, your parents don't want to fucking see you. Neither does the receptionist at your office. Neither does the dead guy at the bottom of the elevator shaft, or the guy who got fired for knowing that someone pushed him. The Mexicans don't want you, the Armenian Jews don't want you. Nobody wants you, and you certainly don't want yourself. But there, you see, you're screwed most. Of all those people, you're the only person who has to have you.

That's when it hit me: I could sleep on the site for a few days.

It would be a temporary thing, just until I could pick up a paycheck (and more important, the pay stub) at the end of the week and use it to show employment so a new landlord would lease to me. I could read the work orders

when I emptied the trash cans in the site manager's trailer at night, so I'd know which floors the crews would be working on during the day and avoid them. Some of the units were finished and I could take a shower there before turning up for my shift. It's not squatting — sometimes the site managers sleep in their trailers. I'd just be taking a little rest between shifts.

And I could shoot without worrying about any goddamn landladies bursting in on me. If it came to that, I mean.

It occurs to me that I'm probably not getting any better, if I'm thinking about how relatively safe it's going to be for me to shoot up. I don't even know where I'm going to put food. I can probably store cans of whatever in the cupboards, but the appliances haven't come in for any of the condos yet and the ones in the model aren't wired. I know because Hector and I tried to cook a dead cockroach on the burner and it didn't even heat up.

SATURDAY, MARCH 17

I may have underestimated how hard it would be to get an apartment in New York on short notice. I spent all day chasing down For Rent signs and calling phone numbers. The problem is, I was making all those calls from pay phones. I was going to give them Lisa's phone number as a point of contact, but it turns out that Lisa's dead from pneumonia complicated by AIDS. So there went that plan.

I don't even know what I'm going to do when (or if) I finally reach someone who's actually there at their desk or whatever, seeing as how I just got thrown out of my last place. It's not like Mrs. Whoever is going to give me a glowing reference, the bitch.

Like this is her fault.

Anyway, I've been at the building for two days now, going on three. The weekend is the easy part, because the unions don't want any part of it, the scabs don't want to cross the unions on a high-profile project like this and the custodial service doesn't have a staff on the building for the weekends. If I run across a security guard — yeah, right — I just point to the Brightways logo on my uniform and claim I'm cleaning up something left during the week. I can do what I want here and not have to sweat anything until Monday.

SUNDAY, MARCH 18

Leave it to the shark to ruin everything. I don't know why he's got to be such a workaholic. I mean, the guy's already obviously some sort of bigshot if he's handling this building. Go eat caviar and drink champagne and leave me the fuck alone, you know? But no, he's got to show the place to somebody on Sunday night, right as I'm in the midst of a good washout. I used the last of that stuff I bought from Jimmy (it was so good, it lasted me longer than it usually would) and who should come waltzing onto the site than Arturo with some Middle

East looking guy in tow. It freaked me out. I don't know what they were looking for on Sunday night. Couldn't the guy visit the property on a normal schedule? I lost track of them after they came on, and I don't have any idea what time they left, but I think it was well after midnight, past the time I turned in for the night on 15.

TUESDAY, MARCH 20

I guess I never really paid much attention to it before, but Arturo's here a lot. When I punch in for my shift, he's here, and his car is still in the parking lot when I go up to my "room." I checked the week's drafts and there's no work scheduled on the rooms up on 11 for a while, which overlook the lot. It's weird, sure, but it lets me concentrate on something other than the habit. Speaking of which, it's probably better for me to stay off it while I'm a guest of Arturo's Towers. While you're on it, you don't shit. When you're off it, all that not shitting comes back with a vengeance. It'd be just my luck to have to take the elevator down in the middle of the night fighting with my own bowels only to see the shark with a look of "Explain this" on his face. The alternative is to keep a bucket with me and empty it when I leave for the morning. That's so disgusting I don't even want to think about it.

Yes, I've done it before.

FRIDAY, MARCH 23

It's getting too close for comfort. They fired six more workers over the last three days — all people who were on shift the night Rosendo took his dive. Rifkind did all the firing, but I made sure to check that Arturo's car was still in the lot when people got the call over the walkie-talkies. There it was.

Now there's maybe six more of us left, and I'm not sure what purpose it's all serving. Are they trying to quietly get rid of everyone who was there to avoid insurance or OSHA, like I guessed before? No, other accidents have happened and nobody's said anything, at least not that I've heard.

That reminds me: I'm going to call Hector this weekend and see how he is.

Arturo's here all the time now. I don't think he ever leaves. Well, that's not true. When he does, it's always with someone and the both of them come back before I'm asleep. I'm like the hunchback of Notre Dame up here, looking down over whatever it is that's at the front of Notre Dame. I don't know. I never went to college there. I'm more like the Phantom of the Opera, watching the world go by and resenting it. I thought that maybe Arturo was bringing back a little something-something while he was on the job, but they've been both men and women with him. Maybe he swings both ways. They seem to stay for the wrong amount of time for that, though, so I've ruled it out. They're here too long for a quickie, but nobody spends the night.

Arturo does.

Hey, maybe the shark is living in the building, too.

The mere thought makes me feel violated.

SUNDAY, MARCH 25

He does. He does live in the building. I went down yesterday after I saw his car was gone and stopped on every floor. I needed to know.

There was something creepy about checking out every space in an unoccupied high rise. I'd say it felt like looking for ghosts, but this building is haunted by people who aren't in it yet. It's being built for people to live their lives, but without all the life that's supposed to occur inside it, it's almost like it's not here, despite being real.

Then I found one that was lived in. Or maybe I should say occupied, because there didn't seem to be any life about it. This wasn't an apartment that was left messy. There was nothing in it to indicate that it was somebody's home other than — and this is the strange, empty part — creature comforts. There was no bed, no Chinese take-out containers, no plates or silverware, not even a pile or basket of dirty clothes. What was in the room was an odd assortment of mail and subscription magazines (Mr. Thomas Arturo or Meier & Partners, attn: Thomas Arturo), a cheap TV, an expensive looking couch, a floor lamp and a desk with a telephone on it. There was a laptop computer on the desk, too, left closed and off.

I was shocked that this man could be in the same situation that I was. Then it dawned on me that we weren't in the same situation at all.

A weird series of thoughts and feelings came over me right then, yet individually distinct, like when you've taken too much ecstasy and you can feel each individual fiber of your shirt. More than anything, I was scared. I said "violated" before. That's the most suitable word. I had come to think of the building as my own, to think of it as a place where I was getting away with something. Certainly not a place where we — whoever we was — were getting away with something. Here was this secret space in my building that wasn't mine. It was a part of what was mine, inside what was mine, but it was here without me knowing it, like waking up and finding that cancer has taken over some vital part of your body.

Behind that, I felt like maybe this wasn't real. I wasn't smacked right then, but I felt like I was and it led me to believe what I was seeing wasn't real. I don't mean like a hallucination, but like being in a deep rush, when you can hear everyone around you talking so brutally slowly and moving with such slow but determined motions. You know that's not how they're really moving and talking, but that's the sense it gives your brain. It was the same now for me, my sudden understanding of what this was, an almost "rising out of" ignorance and seeing something new. I'm not good with words, but that's what it was. I didn't trust it. As an experienced heroin

abuser, I have the sense to know that what I'm doing to my brain isn't the same effect I'm having on the outside world, so I instinctively mistrusted it. My last thought was that I could sell the couch if I needed to.

I had enough sense not to touch anything. Being put on trial for 13 counts of petty theft encourages you to mind your manners when breaking into someone else's place and hopefully avoid getting that 14th count. In a way, I didn't want to touch anything. This secret place felt dirty. It had hidden from me. The longer I stayed there, the more evil it felt, being not only a foreign intruder but so oddly empty of basic things. What, Arturo lives here but goes to a hotel to sleep? Or back home? This wasn't an office — I had personally cleaned his office, which he shared in the trailer with the site manager.

I saw that the bathroom door was closed, and was immediately overcome by morbid curiosity. The water hadn't been connected here yet, so he couldn't be showering here, and if he was shitting and pissing like a normal man, why hadn't I heard him banging around at the Port-a-Johns on the site?

A honking car woke me from the draw the closed door had over me. I shook my head and hauled ass back up the stairs to my own place. It was squalid by comparison, being little more than a duffel bag, a bottle of straight whisky and a short stack of porn mags.

The thing was, there in my solitude, reflecting on all the out-of-place strangeness I had just seen, I felt that things were different. I don't know how to say it. Like I had learned something and I couldn't quite remember how I felt before I had learned it, but I definitely knew that I was much happier back when I didn't know. That was pretty upsetting, to think that I was happier being a homeless junkie who emptied trash cans than the same thing who had been in that room. It was like not being a kid anymore, or like having sex and it being messier and less satisfying than what you expected. It wasn't quite so nostalgic and fuzzy, though — it was like I had found a horrible secret, rather than a disappointing one. What I knew wasn't frustrating. It was somehow evil.

I also knew that I had to get back there. I had to confront what it was, even if I didn't confront Arturo face to face. That made it really hard to sleep.

MONDAY, MARCH 26

Okay, I went back. I didn't have much time, because I had to get in and out before the construction shift started. That got me to thinking. Why didn't the construction shift find out about the shark? Did they know he was there? Wasn't he supposed to be in the office trailer?

I had only about 20 minutes. I clocked out after the custodial shift and left the site like I usually do, taking a quick walk around the building and coming back in through the chain-link gate left open for the first of the

crews. Back up the stairs, as normal, so nobody sees the construction lift moving.

I stood before the closed door, wondering what to do. For lack of anything better, I knocked. No answer. Scared as all fuck, I slid the crew key into the lock and opened the door. Everything was just as it had been the night before, but something inside me knew he had been there since.

And there was that closed bathroom door.

Aside from the door, I didn't mess with anything. I didn't turn on any lights or look in the refrigerator or nothing. It was like I was drawn to the door, another unsolved mystery, but the one that held the most potential. I opened it. What can I say?

There was nothing inside.

I should have been relieved, but that nervous bit inside me told me something was wrong. There was nothing inside. Nothing. No razors, toothbrush, toilet paper. No magazines on the back of the tank. No shower curtain. Nothing at all. How does a man live here with no bed and no food and nothing to clean himself up with?

Every time I found out more, it only left me with more questions. I hated that and still do.

Right at that moment — right when I thought that this harmless situation was really something very dangerous in disguise, my luck finally ran out. Somebody was jiggling a key in the lock.

I panicked. I didn't know what else to do. I ran toward the door and when it opened just the tiniest bit, I pulled it wide and ran. Something really fast flashed past me into the room, but I didn't pay it any attention. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. With any luck, whoever it was wouldn't ID me because of the darkness and surprise. I ran back to the stairs and up, back to my room. I trusted that if someone was chasing me, his first instinct would be that I would head downstairs instead of up, and lose me that way.

Back up in my room, I grabbed my stuff, breathing hard and sweating and throwing it all into my bag. It wasn't someone's home that I had been in — it wasn't a person I was dealing with. The shark wasn't a man. His bizarre little home had shown me that. He was something else.

Again with the questions that should have been answers. I only knew one thing, and that was that I had to get away from there, and do it soon.

I spent the night, or day, I guess, at the bus station and took a shower at the Y. Right now, it's time that I should be heading back to work, but I haven't decided if I can. Is it safe? Who came into the apartment, and do they know it was me? I know there's only one way to find out. It's strange, but I feel like I have to figure this out. It's not out of loyalty to Hector — shit, I forgot to

call him — or Rosendo, but it's something. I don't know. It's like I was picked to find this out, and I have to see it through.

I'm going to work.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28

Nobody's onto me, I think. I went to work yesterday and today, and I think I might have actually put the fear of God into Arturo because he wasn't around either day. I was a little touchy around Rifkind, but I chalk that up to the lack of sleep I've been having. I've been sort of staying at the Y and the bus station and at Grand Central. Washing my uniform by day in a laundromat. One good part is that I don't really have time, money or the opportunity to shoot up. Forced sobriety. I don't know that it's the best way, because it's not actually me choosing to be clean, and I've had to spend some unpleasant time in public toilets, but what can you do?

I bought some dope the other night when I left work. It doesn't fuck you up so much as heroin, but it still makes that ache go away. That ache is what I'm talking about when I think of Arturo and the whole situation. I don't even want to think about it, and that's where the dope comes in. I've got enough left to last until Friday, which is payday.

THURSDAY, MARCH 29

Worst day of my life. Worse than being busted and worse than hearing the guilty verdict.

Arturo is a monster. A real monster. This is the first time I've seen him since the night I was in his room, if that was even him, and he looks like the devil. His mouth is all full of fangs and his eyes are red and his skin is pale white, like he's dead.

I swear to God, I wish I was making this up. I thought it was aftereffects from the weed, but there's no way I smoked enough to hallucinate. I thought it might have been a flashback, then, or maybe like some big clog of drugs in my veins broke off and started circulating through my body, but that wasn't it, either. I could see everything crystal clear. I was sweating like a fiend while I was in that room with him and Rifkind.

They fucking fired me. It never seems to stop getting stranger. I was there, at work, when Rifkind called me into the room we'd been using as a conference room. Well, more like a meeting room where we discussed the night's assignments and all that shit, but that's not important. I walked in and there was the shark, sitting at the table. Actually, he looked like the Devil.

I must be in shock. The Devil fired me and I'm writing in this notebook instead of jumping off a bridge. That's what happened. The Devil fired me. Rifkind closed the door and said something about being someplace unauthorized or inappropriately being on site or something. I don't even remember what he said, because I was looking at Arturo. I couldn't stop staring. It was



like looking at a car accident, except this accident could get up and leave and bring whatever wreckage it was wherever he went.

I'm not making any sense. Hang on. I'll get it together.

Okay, so they fired me for abuse of privilege. Like it's a privilege to work in a dump owned by the Devil, where Mexicans mop up the shit. I was told that tonight's pay would be the last I would get, and that due to the nature of my termination (these are their words, not mine), I would forfeit the present week's salary.

I should have been pissed, I know. I should have been pointing a finger and making accusations and threatening to sue and all that bullshit, but I knew right there, looking at Arturo, that Hector was in the same boat. Shit, I still haven't called him. He had his hands tied too. Hector caught on to whatever Devil-thing Arturo had done to Rosendo and called him on it, or maybe it was just that Arturo knew that he knew. Other people on the staff got sacked so it would just look like layoffs or an expense control thing, and my cut would look like the same thing.

But Arturo cocked his head at me. It must have been the way I was looking at him. Him tipping his head like that sort of freed me from the stare I had on him, and I looked at Rifkind. He looked like a demon, like he was some imp at Arturo's command. He handed me my check with a serious look.

Fuck it. I took the check and ran like a motherfucker. Ran all the way to Grand Central, block after block. I didn't want to go back to any of the places I had been before, because if they knew that much about me, they might know where I'd been staying. I didn't know what they knew, or what they could find out if they needed to. I just ran. I'm here at the station now, writing this and keeping a close eye on everyone coming and going from the platform. With any luck, everyone else will just think I'm a bum and use that New York "I don't see you" to keep me away from them.

Fuck, there's another one of them here. Another Devil.

SATURDAY, MARCH 31

After a rough two days, I've come out of hiding. Having never seen these things before, I finally found out what they are. Hang on.

Friday, I called Hector like I'd been meaning to for so long. The first time I called, he hung up on me, but then I called him again and managed to get out that I'd been fired, too. He didn't say anything for a while, but then told me that I'd better come over to his place. I still remembered the way, so I was over there in less than half an hour. In retrospect, I didn't see any of the devils during daylight.

When I got to Hector's, his wife and daughter were gone. He said he sent them back to Mexico. It was what

was safest for them, he said. I didn't know what that meant, so we sat down to talk about it.

After Rosendo's death, Hector said he had a suspicion that something wasn't quite right. His wife's cousin worked at the morgue where Rosendo ended up and did all the paperwork. According to him, there were two different reports from the medical examiner. The first one read that the cause of death was blood loss, but the second made the fall and impact the cause of death. The second ME's report was the one that was filed.

That didn't make any sense to me. I've seen enough TV cop shows to know that those doctors make mistakes all the time. Then Hector told me to think about what the first guy's statement suggested.

If the second account was correct, it was the fall that did Rosendo in. I remember being there on the site, though, and noticing that there wasn't much blood. Hector pointed out that was what the first doctor was saying. Rosendo was dead before the fall. More importantly, he had died of blood loss before the fall. Neither report indicated that there had been a struggle before the death.

Someone had taken Rosendo's blood before throwing him down the shaft, to cover up his death.

At this point, I started to really get creeped out by the way things were falling into place. I knew what Hector's next words were going to be even before he spoke about the "vampiro," and I knew he was right. That was what I had seen in Arturo, and that other one I saw at Grand Central — an ugly one — must have been one he sent to watch me. Rifkind was under his control, too, I felt sure, whether he knew it or not.

The feeling came over me again there, that I couldn't trust what I was thinking or had seen. I mean, there I was, a grown man, assuring myself that this wasn't just a murder, but that there were vampires behind it. Worse, I was believing it.

Worse yet, I knew it was true.

I begged off from Hector and he looked relieved to see me go. We each knew what the other was going to do. Hector was going back to Mexico to be with his family and to get away from the vampiro. With nothing left to lose, I was going to fight it myself.

MONDAY, APRIL 9

I spent the past week digging up information on vampires, just to make sure I didn't do anything stupid by jumping into this. As fucked-up as the whole thing is — blood stealers, people getting killed and then fired to cover it up, the second death report — it's given me purpose. I haven't touched anything crooked in over 10 days. No junk, no booze, not even a jack-off magazine. At the same time, the whole world has felt a little more fake. At times I catch myself completely shocked at what I've been doing with this research. You see, by now, I'm

fully prepared to do what it takes to get rid of the vampiro. You have to drive a wooden stake through its heart, decapitate it and then burn it all. It turns out that all that shit about finding their coffin and turning them over so they dig downward is just superstition. Well, some of the books said you could do that, but the library I went to mostly had books that were printed in the 20th century, and I believe in those a little more than the older ones.

It's not too unlike being high, this weird sensation of walking around in a monster's world. I'm just not the monster for once.

I don't really have time to watch Arturo as closely as I'd like. I know that his hiding place isn't really at the construction site — that's just a place he uses when he has to. As it turns out, vampires don't seem a whole lot different from people, once you get past the blood sucking thing that makes them what they are. They still need money, so some steal it or take jobs. I haven't observed the shark as long as I should to take him down, or at least that's what In Nomine Sanguinis says. Still, I don't really have time to study him more. Who knows what he's doing when he's not preying on the night shift? The book says vampires have to feed every night (but that they don't automatically make vampires out of the people they feed on like in the movies, or automatically kill everyone they feed on, or the whole world would have been dead already). It didn't say how they get away with it, but it did suggest that they have hypnotism powers. That being the case, I've figured it out. It surprises me that no one's tried this before, but when I wait for Arturo to come back, I'm going to jab some junk about 20 minutes before sunrise. That way, my mind will be too messed up for Arturo to play any tricks on me.

And, yeah, hopefully it'll take me enough away from myself so that I don't chicken out. I don't think I

could kill a man sober, even if he was a monster. It's freakish to look back on what I've done in the past and feel so oddly humanitarian about what I'm about to do. When I was breaking into people's cars and houses and stealing their shit to keep up the habit, I didn't give half a fuck. Now that I'm about to kill this thing, I'm nervous. Maybe I'm not cut out for this good shit. Maybe I'm best being selfish. Maybe I was better off never knowing the Devil existed.

THURSDAY, APRIL 12

Dear diary this is the second night I tried this oh shit but the first night I remembered to write it down. Last night arturoshark never showed up here but I see his car is still here tonight and he usually stayed late on Thursdays and Fridays I sort of remember its like being in a hole.

I am in the closet and its still very cold but Im sweating and its half because of the herone and half because of what I have to do all my works is on the floor here in the closet and im worried that he can smell the match. The broomhandle I sharpened it so its long and I can get to his heart with it before he gets to me. I mailed the rest of this journal to the parole no probabtion offcer so Officer Holland if you don't here from me again you will know that the VAMPIRE has gotten me. Wait if you don't have this how will you know that that's my dying wish fuck it

Okay soon I will have to stop writeing because I know he could hear the pen SCRATCHING on the paper because I can hear it too and I know he can smell the matches and the rubbing alcohol and the weird like vinegar smell of the tar.

I could see my blood when I pulled the plunger but that's my blood.

I can hear footsteps in the hall and pink light is coming in from unde the door

That's my blood
that's my blood



CHAPTER 2: AWAKENED FROM THE NIGHTMARE

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

— Genesis 11:9

Note: I originally found these documents while doing an Internet search for any potential leads on rots, shapechangers and other things. From what I can gather, these pages were not meant for public viewing. They were stored under an account kept at one of those free web-hosting sites, the sort that litter pages with pop-ups and banner ads. Further research indicated that no outside pages linked to these files. Judging by the rather arcane naming convention used to store them, the author must have meant them either for his own reference or he simply used the web site as a means to store copies of his notes. The index.html file under the web account contained nothing of interest, simply a collection of links to a few news sites, comic strips and search engines — the typical collection of data available at countless sites.

The page revealed nothing of its owner's identity or location. I found the files in their current condition. Tragically, it looks as if whoever maintained them is no longer in a position to do so. I kept an eye on the pages for a while and saw no updates. After a few months of this, I decided to download and archive them. The pages have since been taken down by the hosting service.

If anyone has more information on this group, please pass it along. I don't want to pass judgment on the

author of this log, but I can't help feeling that his approach to our calling is anything but constructive, or even ethical. Nonetheless, I don't want to turn this into a flame. Just read this and keep your eyes open.

I've changed proper names of people, places and things when they're given. If any of these folks are still around, they need to remain anonymous. As you'll see, they need every bit of help they can get.

LOG ENTRY 1

Bill was too easy to track, but then again counting how often he gets his face in the local paper I should've figured he was the type to draw attention.

Note: Keep track of this guy after hours. If he's shacking up with some cooze I might be able to get a few grand out of it. But based on what I know about the guy, that ain't likely.

Note: Don't even think about blowing any whistles about any of this shit. Dead men don't spend money.

Our boyscout Bill met up with Walker, as I suspected. It looks like there's a handful of us in the area and we're active, but more importantly appear to be organized. I blame Walker for that. There's some bitch, and some young guy who looks like he doesn't know that Johnny fucking Rotten went out of style decades ago.

They all met for a couple hours and then each left separately. These idiots meet at one of their homes, and then they're worried about looking suspicious when they leave. Idiots. "Johnny" already has half the local tenants on edge.

They can't have been at this for too long. Too sloppy. I've been at this for a while, but it'll be interesting to see how it all comes together for others. I wonder if they can cut it.

Note: Keep an eye on Bill. Trace the chick and get a name. Get a handle on Johnny. Case Walker's joint when he heads off to work at the yuppie toy store.

LOG ENTRY 2

The bugs are in place, but even better, I got an apartment in this dump. That last cash from that Kuerten thing went to it. I'll be eating noodles until I get my deposit from George, but it will all hopefully be worth it. I can see how these idiots go and maybe profit from their mistakes.

I've always gotten more of a thrill just listening in on some jerk's daily routine than on spying on him. I guess recording the hot and heavy grunts of politicians and business jerks makes the ordinary stuff that much more interesting. The best stuff comes out of nowhere. One second, Mr. Schmuck is flossing, the next he's thinking out loud about his kiddie porn collection.

Walker isn't anywhere near that fascinating. He just shuffles around a lot from the kitchen to the living room. Radio's kept to NPR, like I couldn't see that coming, and he spends a lot of time fixing dinner. The guy might be a fat ass, but at least he cooks his own food. I can respect that — a man being overweight because he can do something, not just because he sits around on his ass all day.

Big clue in to why these guys are so out to lunch: Walker doesn't own a computer. Based on his bookshelves and just the feel of his place, he wishes we could all go back to a "simpler" time. Predictable, based on his job at the antique shop. Seems like he's also a bit of a nut about the war. His bookcases look like a history section. That explains a lot of what I've seen. If Walker's the one organizing things, he's keeping a tight leash on everyone and trying to do things slow and careful. It may also explain why everyone meets at Walker's place. The guy just doesn't see the danger. My guess is that Walker's in charge because he acts the most like he knows what's going on. He's seen shit in WW II or whatever and thinks that qualifies him to deal with all this. He'll learn the hard way.

Sounds as if the next meeting of this little sewing circle is tomorrow night. I'm not going to bother with a transcript of the phone call, but it's pretty clear that Bill was the recipient. Seems like he's making a pitch

to take the reins off Walker. Typical people bullshit. There's a huge problem facing them and they fall into petty bickering. I'm glad, I guess, that my change happened when I was alone. I almost got killed, but I didn't have to put up with anyone's bullshit. I guess I can say that now.

LOG ENTRY 3

Lots of interesting stuff to sort through. It looks like I've really lucked out. From what I can tell, three of these guys have dealt with only one thing before. Still not clear on how Walker got involved with them or how he got the wake-up call. I don't know yet if that's even important.

Partial transcript of their latest meeting follows. I didn't bother tracking anything that was said before Johnny, the last to arrive, showed up. They just made small talk and acted as if they weren't this little social club that gets together to whack monsters. That didn't stop them from spending most of the time arguing, though. Jesus, these guys are going to get killed. I'm tempted to step in and set them straight, but what would I gain?

Johnny: Sorry I'm late. My asshole boss was on my back.

Walker: These meetings are problem enough for me. I'd appreciate it if everyone would be on time.

Ellen: You say that every time. Do you really think you're getting through to him?

Walker: Keep it down. We meet here because my neighbors will call the cops if anything weird happens, but we don't want them calling on us.

Bill: I know that this is a burden for you, but I don't see where we have any other option.

Ellen: Tell me about it. Things have been rough for me since all this started.

Bill: It's been hard on us all, but we can't keep taking it out on each other. We've spent more time arguing than doing anything about... them.

Walker: What have you turned up about that girl?

Bill: My contacts in the department tell me she's fine. It looks like most of her injuries came from how... he handled her after we got involved. Her ankle was broken and she had a few bruises and scrapes, but that was it. The silver lining here is that since she was checked into the hospital she's been reunited with her parents.

Ellen: Does she remember anything? Has she said anything about... us?

Bill: Not that I know of. She never saw a thing, doesn't remember it or just doesn't want to talk about it.

Walker: I assume the police aren't pressing the issue?

Bill: Sounds like they're not taking it as a serious attack. More like some freak accident or something.

Johnny: Well, she's black, so what the fuck do they care?

Bill: What does that have to do with it?

Johnny: Oh, come on....

Walker: If the police aren't taking this seriously, we have to convince them to. People... the government has to know what's going on.

Johnny: Oh, please. We can't trust the government! Don't you watch TV?

Walker: I don't waste my time with that idiot box. I'll bet Bill agrees with me.

Ellen: Look, has anyone come up with any ideas about what to do next?

Bill: I know I got everyone's hopes up last time, but I can't see any way to leverage my position any more than I have. I can get us some information, but I doubt I could convince the DA that... monsters are running around the city.

Ellen: And it's an election year.

Walker: Oh, for God's sake!

Ellen: Look, I can't sleep at night. I drive straight from school back home. I order out food and slip the money under the door. I keep the lights on all night. Every damn light in my apartment. We need to start doing something soon or I'm going to go insane. How often do we have to meet and talk and make lists before we stop that thing? When the hell can I leave my apartment without being scared to death?

Walker: We're all under a lot of stress. I'm scared, too. But we have to be strong. Back in the war, we never knew when we were going to buy it. I was scared half to death. But you learn that you have to keep going. That's all you have.

Johnny: Yeah, we all saw *Private Ryan*.

Bill: Damn it, Johnny, I'm sick of your shit. Either start helping or stop coming.

Johnny: Who the hell put you....

Ellen: Stop it!

Bill: Ellen, I know you want to do something. We all do. But things have... changed. We don't really know what we're getting into or what things are really like out there. We have to go slow. If we rush into something we could get killed.

Ellen: Yeah, and the longer we wait the more people out there are hurt by that thing. It's still out there. Maybe there are more. We can't waste any more time!

Walker: Please, keep your voice down. You can make all the noise you want when we meet at your place.

End Transcript

This went on for about another hour, things basically going back and forth. Hopefully, these morons will stick together. My client has been clamoring for me to do some more work on subjects other than Bill. With

what he's willing to pay, even this project might have to be pushed aside for a while. Besides, I don't know how many more evenings I can take of this crew.

Note: Find out what's going on in Ellen and Johnny's lives. Find out what politics Bill's been into lately. Find out how such a mismatched group got together in the first place.

LOG ENTRY 4

Things have gotten really weird. Terrifying. I don't know how to put it into words. I've included a transcript of what happened, for what good it is. Things happened so quickly. I'm not sure how it all happened.

I guess I can say that the shit's hit the fan and I have a front-row seat. If I play my cards right, I can use both sides to come out of this looking pretty. I just need to be smart.

I'll start with my investigation of the past few days. Johnny lives in an apartment downtown with five or six other kids. He's a student and works in some hole in the wall store. Pretty typical hypersensitive college kid. Note: Watch for any drug use. Might be useful if I need to give him or someone close to him some encouragement.

Ellen lives by herself in a rundown apartment building, though she used to have a house in the suburbs. Divorced. She's a teacher, so will be sensitive to blackmail. A picture of her doing something weird put in the wrong hands would destroy her. Still, she seems self-righteous. She might turn on me rather than bow out.

Walker is Walker. I don't think he leaves his apartment except for work and the occasional trip to the store. Hell, I might not have friends either, but at least I get out once in a while. If he has kids or grandkids, they probably don't come to see him. Can't say I blame them.

Bill's been a busy little beaver, and my client has made some noise about getting more information on his activities. Take a pill. They have me looking into some old bird, too, a judge who's been on the bench for a bunch of years. He's a dyed in the wool Republican, but not exactly a public figure. I don't think he's even been mentioned in the papers for a while. I don't see why he's so important, but I'm not paid to. These sure are some curious people I'm working for.

There's not much to say about Bill, at least not about his public life. He plays the boy scout, through and through. "Compassionate conservatism." I figure he's due to run for something bigger than state, if something doesn't bite his head off first. If I'm lucky, I'll get info on how he copes with the truth, and on a senatorial hopeful. They usually have the bucks.

So, we've got a punk college kid, a divorced teacher, a shut in and a clean-cut politician. Of all of us out there

who could've taken a huge step to figuring out what's really going on, these are the chumps who actually talk to a vampire. Or something, anyway.

Thank God I'm here for them.

Ellen: That's the point. We can learn all we want, but if we don't do anything with it then what the hell is the point?

Bill: We've been over this. If we make a mistake it may cost us more than our own lives — the lives of people who may need our help. We might be the only ones who have any idea what's going on. Or we might all be out of our minds. What if we go off half-cocked and hurt people? If what we've seen is real, we owe it to everyone to do things right. A mistake could haunt us for the rest of our lives.

Johnny: Or at least our term in office.

Walker: Shut your pie hole, boy.

Johnny: What, you want to fight me?

Ellen: Would you two shut up?

Walker: I won't have someone telling me what to do in my own damn house.

Bill: What was that?

Walker: You don't know shit about what's it's like to fight for everything. Between her crying and your whining, we're never going to get anything done.

Bill: Did you hear that?

Johnny: God, I'm sick of this.

Bill: Shut up! Did anyone hear that?

[Silence.]

[Knocking. Front door?]

[Silence.]

[Knocking. Definitely front door.]

Bill: Who the hell is that?

Walker: Shut up. It's got to be the neighbors.

[Knocking.]

Johnny: Well, answer it.

Walker: Why?

Johnny: Because... Jesus, I don't know.

Bill: Answer the door. After all the noise we've made, things will only look stranger if you don't.

Walker: Fine.

[Sound of door opening.]

Unknown Voice: Mr. Walker?

Walker: Yes. Look, if it's about the noise, I'm sorry. We'll keep it down.

Unknown Voice: That's not why I'm here. I'm here because I think we have something in common.

Walker: Come again?

Unknown Voice: My name's Vazquez. I—

[Door slams.]

Walker: Sweet mother of Jesus, it's one of them!

Ellen: What?

[Loud crashing sound.]

Ellen: Jesus! Johnny?

Walker: He's out cold!

[Knocking at door.]

Ellen: What are we going to do?

Bill: Shhhhh!

Walker: What do we do?

Bill: Ellen, help me get Johnny into the bedroom. Stall. Play dumb. See what it wants. If anything happens, we'll... help you.

Walker: Jesus. Mary.

[Knocking at door.]

Walker: What if he leaves?

Bill: Then he leaves. If it stays, we'll... take care of it.

[More noises.]

[Door opens.]

Walker: Uh... what do you want?

Unknown Voice: [Long pause.] Look, I'm not here to make trouble. I think we have a... mutual interest that we should talk about. Can I come in?

Walker: No... I mean... yeah. Yeah, sure.

Unknown: Thank you. [Pause.] I'll get right to it. My name is Vazquez. I saw you and your friends in the park that night. You know what I'm talking about.

Walker: Oh. Uhhh, I'm not really sure what to say about that. It's like I told the cops: Some guys attacked a girl. I just happened to see it. Uh, those other people were the ones who got involved.

Vazquez: I do special investigation work into cases like this. That's not quite what you told the police, is it? The others gave a story like that, but you claimed you saw something... more. Something you couldn't explain.

Walker: I'm an old man. I don't see too well anymore. I don't know what I saw.

Vazquez: Mr. Walker, you don't have to lie to me. I was there that night, too. I saw everything you did.

[Silence.]

Vazquez: What I'm curious about is what happened next. I saw what the others — and you — did. I was expecting trouble from that one that night.

[Door opening.]

Bill: I don't know who or what you are, but you had better start talking or I swear to God I'll shoot.

Vazquez: Oh, what the fuck is this? Put that gun down.

Bill: I'm serious. I'll shoot.

Vazquez: Then shoot. Jesus, is this how you welcome a guest?

Ellen: Answer our questions and you won't get hurt.

Vazquez: Funny, I was about to say the same thing.

Ellen: Shoot him. Just shoot him.



Vazquez: You're the others from the park. But aren't you short one? Where's the kid—

Bill: Shut up! I swear if you make a wrong move—

Vazquez: Like this?

[Scream. Sound of metal breaking.]

Vazquez: Can we please talk now?

Ellen: Fuck you!

[Sound of impact. Crashing.]

Bill: Ellen? Ellen?

Vazquez: I'm not the one attacking you here, people. I could have killed her, but I didn't.

Bill: All right... all right. Let's all be... calm. What do you want?

Vazquez: Obviously this is just too much for you. I thought you might have been ready, but I guess not. I came to talk about something we all want: That thing from the park dead. I want to work out a deal, but this isn't the right time.

Walker: What are you...? This doesn't make any sense.

Vazquez: What the are you talking about "sense"? What doesn't make sense is inviting someone into your house, jamming a gun in his face and then bum-rushing him. You just fucking tried to kill me. You don't know jack shit about me or what's going on.

I'm offering you people a deal. Think about it. I'll be back.

[Door opens and closes.]

Bill: Check on Ellen. I'll get Johnny.

Walker: Do you think she's....

Bill: No, she's still breathing. I think she's just stunned.

We have to keep our heads. You saw what he did to that gun. I think if he wanted us dead, we would be. We need to decide what to do.

Walker: "Decide"? What's there to decide? We have to get out of here!

Bill: He found us, didn't he? He said he saw us all that night — you, too. He knows everything about us. Where are we going to hide?

End Transcript

Note: Find any information on this "Vazquez."

LOG ENTRY 5

Found absolutely nothing on Vazquez. Didn't expect the name to turn up anywhere, but the camera I have set up by the front door didn't pick up anything remarkable, either. I got an image of an old guy wearing a coat and hat. That's probably Mr. Kinney from the third floor, unless the leech is in disguise. I didn't get a look at the face, but Kinney did come back later on and I got him clean on the monitor. There were two others who stood out: a young guy, early 20s, short blonde hair, glasses, light leather jacket, jeans. The other one was tall, probably six and a half feet, mid-length dark hair,

stubble, collared shirt, slacks. I've come up with the following theories based on last night's transcript.

1. Vazquez is normal enough looking that regular people can't pick him out as anything special. He walked down the hall without drawing attention, and felt comfortable knocking on Walker's door. He probably thought he could bluff his way in. Walker must've looked at him closely. Vazquez played it pretty cool, but I think he was surprised that they really spotted him. One strike against them for blowing an advantage, but score one for Walker being alert enough to keep his eyes open.

2. Vazquez is tough, overconfident or incredibly stupid. If he did see what happened at the park the night of this group's wakeup, he must have known something was up about them. But he still walked into it all last night. If these things are predators, if they really do feed on blood or something, maybe the stories I've heard about them are true. Shit, he broke Bill's gun with his bare hands and put Ellen down in a heartbeat. I've had to knock a few heads. KOing someone isn't like in the movies. If someone goes down in one blow, you got lucky or you killed them. This guy is just one bad fucker, or all leeches are incredibly strong and fast.

I'm at square one here. Maybe he's an enforcer or foot soldier and has to be tough. If that's true, someone is giving him orders or pulling his strings. I better keep that in mind, just in case.

3. He knows a hell of a lot more than he lets on. He knew those three were at that rally and saw that thing. That either places him there (like he said), places someone he knew there, or places him in alliance with the monster those three — four, I guess — saw. He knew a lot about Walker's police report. He's gotta have connections. I had to burn a hell of a lot of favors to get it.

But why did I have to go through so much hassle to get a damn assault report? The department is under pressure to deal with the case, what with all the muckety-mucks and rich kids running around there protesting affirmative action or whatever. But why the hell would it be hard to get that report? The guys downtown usually figure I'm working it from their angle, trying to smoke someone out. I might be greedy but I'm not going to fuck over the department to cover someone's ass. Someone might be out to protect Bill, but he came out of this looking good. Politician leaps to helpless girl's rescue. Start printing up the ballots now. This Vazquez guy is either experienced at working angles, has better access than me or something else is going on. Maybe he had something to do with throwing roadblocks in my way. It would make sense if he was covering his tracks.

But why would he cover his tracks?

I have to wait and see for now. The meeting tonight went a lot faster than I expected. No point in

transcribing it. I don't care so much about them as I do how they'll get along with Vazquez. It took some work, but Bill managed to get Ellen to agree to another meeting with the thing. Jesus, she was pissed. On one hand she wants to kill the guy for decking her, but on the other she's more afraid now than ever. She's seen one of the things close up and it kicked her ass. Walker wants to double cross it or something. Funny. The old man was the only one who didn't get his ass kicked so he wants to run in guns blazing.

Looks like they want to smoke screen Vazquez and try to squeeze something useful out of him. Ellen's scored one point, though: they want info on the first thing they saw, the one that Vazquez seems to know about. Not just who he is or what he's up to, but how they can take him down permanently. She always goes straight for the throat. Typical woman. Pissed off one minute, blubbering mess the next.

LOG ENTRY 6

No point in bothering with any pre-transcript commentary. I've been kept up with a lot of paying work. But dear God, I couldn't ask for more dirt on how others like me and the things act. I could get the goods on any of them at this point. And even if I don't, I'll know what to look for if I ever have to put the screws to them or get some quick cash.

Action picks up just after Vazquez arrives. Of course, he's the last one to show up. Cameras picked up the blond man I saw last time, lurking around the entrance to the building. Johnny and Ellen walked right by him. They must have been really nervous or preoccupied. I swear the guy had to move out of Ellen's way when she came up the steps. Fucking amateurs.

Vazquez: So are we ready to talk business or is there any more bullshit left from last time?

Bill: We don't want any more trouble. We're prepared to hear you out.

Vazquez: I see the kid's here, too. Good.

Ellen: Look, can we just cut to the chase? You seem to know what's going on and we want this over with.

Vazquez: [Laugh.] Don't worry. Me too. You have to understand: We're not all into jumping people in parks. I want to deal with that animal who did. I assume you do, too.

Walker: Maybe. But if you want him so bad, why don't you do it yourself?

Vazquez: I have my reasons. Let's just say that my hands are tied. He'll also see me coming a mile away. You, meanwhile, he won't see coming at all. You may have "met" him before, but I promise that he won't remember you. Let's just say that you can all look the same to some of us.

[Complaints and sounds of irritation.]

Vazquez: This is business, not personal. If you can't tell the difference, we have nothing more to talk about.

Walker: What's in it for us?

Vazquez: Satisfaction? Revenge? This is your chance to have them. What else could you want?

Bill: Information.

Vazquez: That's what I'm here for. I'm going to tell you everything about him that you need to—

Bill: No, about you. About all of you. What are you?

Vazquez: What do you think I am?

Ellen: Dead.

Vazquez: Okay.

Walker: You don't blink. You don't breathe. You smell, though.

[Pause.]

Bill: You look like us, maybe you even live among us, but you're not one of us. Maybe you even hunt us like animals, like a... vampire.

Vazquez: "Vampire" is good. That's good. We think legends of vampires grew out of contact between us and people.

Ellen: "Us"? So there's more of you?

Vazquez: There's more than just the two of us, me and the one you ran into at the park. There aren't many of us, though, and for the most part we try avoid people. We keep to ourselves. We like it that way. That's why I want that thing dead. He's attracting too much attention.

Johnny: So where did you all come from?

Vazquez: Where did people come from? Where did you come from? Where did the world come from? We just are. Just like you are. Look, I'm not playing twenty questions with you. Can we just continue here?

Ellen: How do we kill that thing? You didn't seem to like a gun pointed at you. Can bullets kill it, too?

Vazquez: Do you like anything being thrown in your face? But the answer to your question is no. Bullets won't kill him—or me. They'll just slow him down... and piss him off. If you really want to get him, use fire. Get some gas and set him on fire.

Johnny: Jesus Christ.

Vazquez: He won't help you.

Bill: So why us?

Vazquez: I don't know why, but you can see him. You recognized him for what he is. That gives you an edge. With my help, you have the advantage. You stopped him once. That means you have... skills. With the four of you, you can take him. I'm just one guy.

Walker: So why don't you do it with us?

Vazquez: I told you, he'd know I was coming.

Bill: How?

Vazquez: He just would. Like I said, there aren't many of us. He'd know it was me and be ready.

Ellen: So where do we find him then?

Vazquez: I have his address.

Bill: How can we trust you?

Vazquez: How can I trust you? How do I know you aren't going to go to the cops or aren't just going to jump me right here?

Johnny: We haven't done anything to you.

Vazquez: I could say the same.

Walker: What if it's a trap? What if you're setting us up?

Vazquez: If I was going to do that why would I have come here at all? I could have just arranged it already. Do you want the address or not?

Bill: All right, we obviously don't trust each other, but what choice do we have right now?

Vazquez: 403 Center Terrace. It's a house. He's hiding out in the basement—for now. I don't know how long he'll stay, so don't fool around. I'll be back in a week.

Walker: We meet again here. I want you on my turf.

Vazquez: Whatever.

Bill: So what if we do... deal with this thing? How will you know?

Vazquez: I'll know.

Bill: What then?

Vazquez: Then you know people are safe.

[Door opens and closes.]

End Transcript

LOG ENTRY 7

Physical Evidence:

1. The house is set back from the street and surrounded by trees. Not too many obvious views from neighboring houses. First floor windows boarded up. Yard recently trimmed.

2. Contact at city hall tells me that the house is owned by "A. Bramlett." Regular payments for property taxes and other fees come from the Bramlett estate. The estate also pays for regular maintenance.

3. Back door obviously forced. Judging from the damage to the lock and doorframe, my group cracked it open with a crowbar. So much for subtlety.

4. First and second floors both empty. Not even any furniture. Lots of dust everywhere. They cased the first and second floors. They hit the basement last.

5. Basement mostly bare, except for a few light fixtures. Looks like they found the thing in the back room in what might have once been an old coal bin. Some blood splatters on the floor, shreds of fabric and hair. Bagged samples for later analysis. Scoring on back wall of bin indicates two missed gunshots. They must have disregarded Vazquez's warning about guns or just panicked. This jibes with police reports of gunshots in

the area. No signs of a coffin, bedding or our resident. They must have taken everything with them.

6. Signs of something heavy dragged through the backyard.

Conclusion: They parked some distance from the house, moved up through the light trees behind it and cased the place. They forced the door, checked the first two stories and went down to the basement. Once down there, they ran into it and, from the looks of things, took it down. At least two shots fired.

I'm surprised they were savvy enough to pick up the casings. If they'd parked out front, the cops would've been on their case, too. A car parked in front of an abandoned house would stick out even to a rookie. They dragged the corpse and whatever else back to the car. Looks like they all made it out.

If I didn't have my head up my ass, I would've caught their planning sessions on tape. I can only imagine how much they fought over whether to believe Vazquez's story. Looks like they met on Wednesday, when I was out tracking that judge. Hit a jackpot there, though. Who'd have thought someone that old could keep up with a whore like that? With the cash that'll nab me, I can afford to keep the tapes rolling 24-7.

The big question here, though, is why? Why the hell does this Vazquez need these idiots to track down and cack one of his buddies? Why didn't he do it himself?

How could he trust that these jokers wouldn't screw up? Maybe he didn't care if they pulled it off or not.

Maybe these things have rules that make them all lay low. That would make sense. Even if a lot of what Vazquez says contradicts some of the accounts I've heard, I have to think that if the government knew about monsters and made a big effort to clean them out, the things would be toast. A bear might be able to kill two or three wolves, but twenty is another story. Sometimes I almost get a sense that monsters are as surprised by us as we are by them. I've watched a few groups and it's almost as if they deal with an enemy that's just as confused and clueless as we are.

Maybe these things have laws or even a whole society. How else could they stay under cover so long? A few months ago I would have laughed at the idea of monsters. And my life depended on seeing things other people missed, on the beat, in vice or in my new job. There's no way in hell that anything so wrong could stay secret for long. But they have.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

Or maybe Vazquez is an opportunist who wanted that monster dead for personal reasons. I can understand that. If there's some sort of drive to keep things quiet, maybe this was an excuse to knock off a rival. Or maybe Vazquez just couldn't handle the guy alone.



No matter what, things don't add up. Vazquez sees Bill, Johnny and Ellen go head to head with this thing. Then he approaches them openly, completely risking his ass. That doesn't make any sense. How the hell would he know that they wouldn't just stomp him? He has to be hiding something. Things don't add up without it. You don't walk into a situation like that unless you know you can get out of it. Know in a 100% ironclad, bulletproof way.

He's using these idiots for something that doesn't even make a blip. I get the feeling that when this all done, the only thing I'll know is that I'm still in the dark.

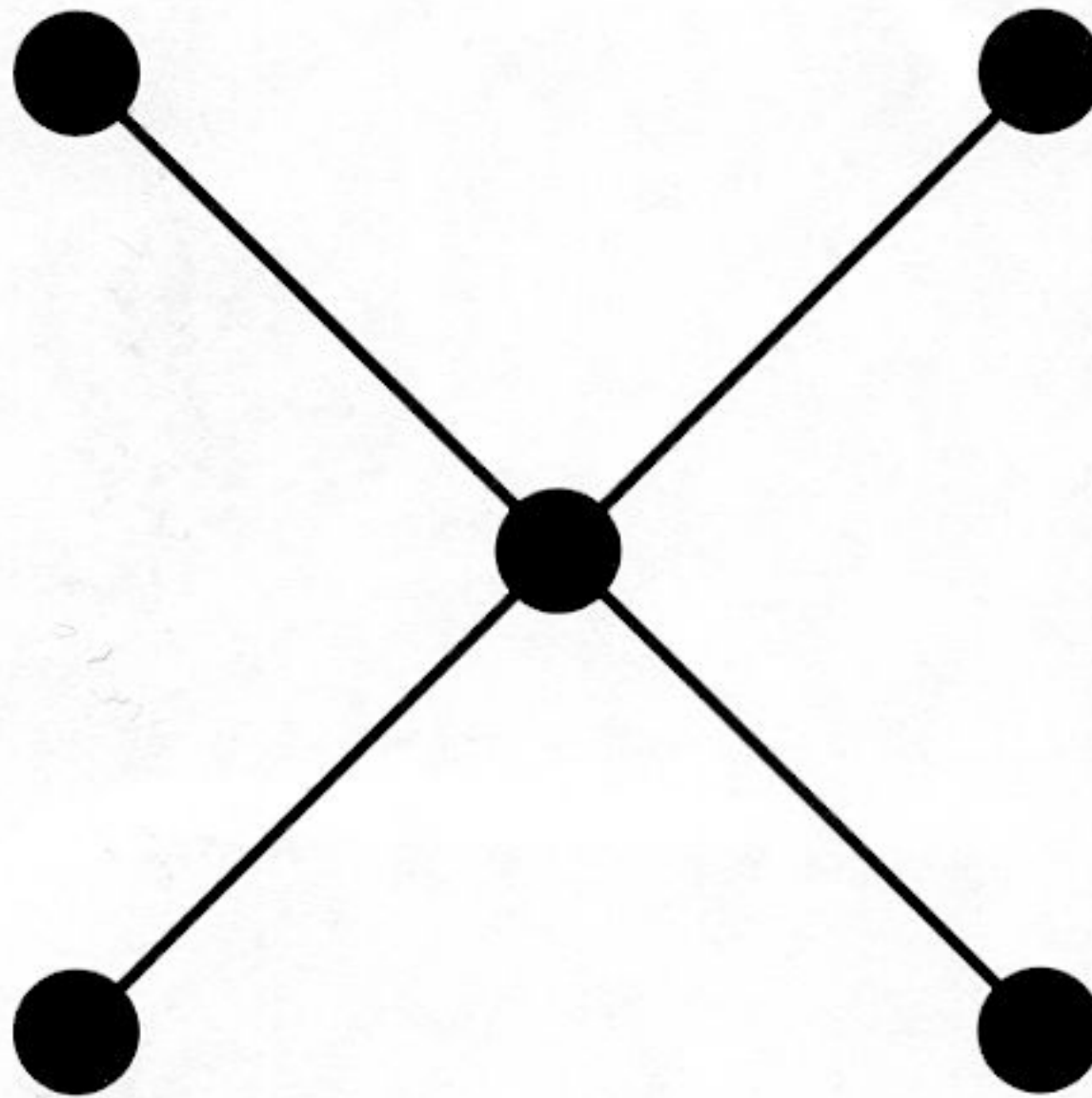
Hopefully, Vazquez will keep up his relationship with those assholes. I'm having all my business calls and mail directed here. All my paying contacts know where

I'm shackled up now, so I can spend more time monitoring Walker's place without worrying about fucking up my other deals.

LOG ENTRY 8

Got a call from one of my contacts this morning. A very troubling call. He insists that I report more often on Bill. And he's doubled my price. I don't want to rat Bill out, but I can't resist money like that. At least this way, no one else gets hired and Bill's real secret doesn't get out. I'll just have to make up some details. But that's not the really disturbing part. They want me to check up on the house where Bill and his friends went after that thing.

What the hell is going on?





CHAPTER 3:

DEAD BUT HOPEFUL

*Thou hast also given me the shield of thy salvation: and
thy gentleness hath made me great.*
— 2 Samuel 22:36

THROUGH THE PAIN

Kill me. Just kill me. Take my head. Open a window, if there are any. Please, whatever it...

Takes me all of my will just to focus enough to...

Oh, God. Please make it stop. It's like when I was 10 and I got poison ivy. I remember screaming, just out of sheer frustration. It hurt to *lay there*. Moving was worse. And it wasn't just that it hurt but that it was...

fucking constant!

And now I can't even scream.

All right, focus, God damn it. Focus, Samuels. How did this shit happen?

But I know how. I know how. It was because of her. Well, her and my big mouth. Equal parts Livia's rhetoric and Samuels' big mouth. Which came first is a big, fucking chicken-and-egg thing.

Not rhetoric. I don't think I meant that. I'm just tied down. Not tied. At least then I could....

God, I can't even squirm. I can't fucking *move*. I'd die to be rid of this. Hell can't be any worse than this.

Bet it can, says Liv in my head. She always said stuff like that.

My senses still work. I don't even have enough control over my body to blink, but fortunately I don't need to. The room is pitch black. My folks took me to these caves in Kentucky when I was a kid. When the guide turned the flashlight off, I marveled over not being able to see my hand in front of my face. I can't even lift my hand now.

I can feel the damp, though. Fungus. Dust. Mold. I know where I am. I'm in Kingston's basement. "Some of the houses built during the '40s had bomb shelters," I remember the bastard telling me. We had a laugh over it. Yeah, if an A-bomb goes off, a few feet of concrete will protect you. Sure. I didn't figure on him using it this way. Makes...

Senses are still working. I can hear rats and I wish like a kid on Christmas for one of them to run across my mouth. I'm so fucking *hungry*. I don't know if I could close my mouth enough to bite, but I'd damn sure try. I can hear water dripping. Was it raining when I got thrown in here? If the basement floods, what then? Would I float? Wood warps when it's wet.

It was raining when I was shut in here. Or when I told him to... No, wait. It wasn't. It was clear that night.

So when was it raining? I remember the living room and I remember the rain beating on...

Me. He was beating me. Some Nip game. "Go," that was it. He taught me how to play "Go" and I was doing all right for the first few games, but then he really started taking me to the cleaners.

My suit's going to get ruined. Is it dry-clean only? Probably is, damn it. I'll have to go to that place on Cedar to get it done....

Oh, wait. I couldn't wear this suit again if I wanted to. I'll have to get a shirt like this one, though. Where'd I get it? Have to figure that out and then go...

I'd never played it before. He taught me the rules and then played me with a handicap. I think I figured it out. He was talking all about how it was like a battle, like strategy, and here I am never having played before and trying to remember what the hell the rules are. Strategy. Not as complex as chess, because every piece is the same, only positions matters. I told him I got it, and then I said something like...

Oh, fuck, what was it I said? I don't remember. Something about the game and how it worked, about potential. He loved it. He got all excited — I know because he smiled. That's as much as he ever does when he gets excited. His fucking stone wall face changes a little bit. And then he...

Oh, shit! That's why I remember that night. That was the night he killed me.

THE EMBRACE

I tried explaining this to Liv, but it all came out wrong. I know how it happened, though. He bit me. I finally beat him at the game, and he seemed to get cold all of a sudden. He just said, "Congratulations," and I thought that was weird, and then he grabbed my head and bit into my fucking throat. And for a minute I thought I was going fag because it felt good, but then it got...

Cold. Oh God, it's cold suddenly. Makes it hurt worse, if that's possible. Makes it feel like...

Death. I felt myself die. I felt or saw a light — God? — and then I felt something in my mouth like...

Fire! Jesus Christ, what was that? Pain like a kick to the nuts...

FIRST KILL

I woke up. I was dead, but I woke up. I was confused and hungry. I told Liv this part. I told her it was scary, but not. Like I couldn't be touched anymore. Kingston opened the door to his study and there was a woman like Liv but oh God so pale and then I...

I can't remember what I did. I really can't. And I won't try. I remember waking up, afterward. But I hadn't really slept. It was like coming off a drunk. The woman was gone but still there. Like I could feel her

heat on the couch and smell her body, but she wasn't there anymore. I felt stuffed like Thanksgiving. More than that. Thanksgiving dinner, a great three-hour fuck, a full body massage, a great movie — I just felt done. Like I didn't need anything.

Kingston told me why. I only had two needs now. "Survival," he said, "and blood." Survival and blood. Eat to live. I was so high, so stuffed and content, that I didn't think about it right then. I just asked him what came next.

It was like a last meal. Give them what they want so they'll be quiet when you drop the ax.

THE FIRST NIGHT

He took me out the next night. We drove around in my car, me driving, him talking. It all sunk in, but I can't focus on it. He told me the rules. I tried repeating them to Liv, but they got jumbled up somehow.

I know I told her about keeping it all quiet, but she'd guessed that one and said it before I did. I remember Kingston telling me, "In the old days we had flowery names for them. Here's a simple way to remember: Think of yourself as normal, at least for a while. Don't laugh when someone asks where you live or what you do for a living. Don't make condescending remarks. And for God's sake, don't say the word 'vampire' unless you're talking about a movie."

I told Liv that much. But the rest is a big bloody smear in my mind. What the fuck did Kingston do to me?

He told me all kinds of shit that night, but a lot of it just seemed to go over my head. I remember it but don't, or can't quite say it. It's like trying to describe to a woman what a hard-on feels like. I know, but what words would I use?

Especially now. Now that I don't get wood anymore. That was a killer, that first night. Kingston took me to bars I didn't know existed. Places I would have loved the night before, but then, after... after death, I guess, I couldn't have cared less. Women shook their tits in my face and I didn't feel a thing.

No, that's a lie. I felt something. I felt my fucking fangs grow in.

I think I might have screamed or something, because Kingston grabbed the girl and glared at her, and she wandered away with a look on her face like someone had punched her in the gut. Then he grabbed me and glared at me.

Shit, what was that? I can't even turn my head toward any sounds. I swear to God I heard something. I thought I heard —

Kingston glared at me and then it was an hour later. I lost the time. I never really thought about it until now. I don't think it matters much. It's easy to lose track around Kingston. He's an easy guy to like. Not that I'm queer or anything — no wood for anybody anymore,



right? — but he's... hell, I don't know. I feel for him. So much it hurts.

God, it hurts.

SECOND KILL

Those first few weeks were strange. Kingston taught me, but mostly he just handed me books. I think he forgot about my disability; I have trouble reading. But he'd give me shit like *The Art of War* and *The Prince* and stuff by Nietzsche and Kant, and then newer stuff about finance and computers. I can work a computer okay, I guess. Maybe that's why he wanted me.

Is it me or is it getting easier to focus? Maybe I can move. *Shit*. Still can't... damn it...

I snuck out once. It was maybe two months after he killed me. He said he had these meetings every month and I had to stay home. But I hadn't eaten — *fed*, he liked to say — and I was going stir crazy. So I got dressed up and went bar hopping. I found some shit out that night.

Like, one-drink minimum bars aren't a good place to go if one drink makes you puke. I tried it. They had my favorite beer, so I ordered, took a sip and spewed on the floor. They didn't exactly kick me out, but they looked at me weird. So I left. I had this fucked-up feeling of superiority, like, "I didn't wanna drink here, anyway."

Sour grapes. That's another book he had me read, *Aesop's Fables*. Sour grapes. Like you really want to but

can't, so you shit on the whole idea. I wanted that beer. No, that's not right... fucking pain. I wanted to...

I *wanted* to want it. How fucked up is that? Actually wishing that you *could* want something? Wasn't anywhere near the last time, either.

I finally found another bar where it was just a five-dollar cover. I was overdressed. Everybody in there was skanky and trashy. It was only 11 and most of them were drunk already. I sat in a corner and watched people hook up. Honest to God, were people always this disgusting? I felt like I was watching animal porn. That's how revolting it all was, like totally against nature, and pointless to boot.

And then this bitch asked me to dance.

I would *never* have called a woman a bitch before. I'm just pissed and I *can't* move. I just...

Told her, "Sure." So we danced, and like any white guy, I looked like a frog in a blender. But she didn't seem to mind. We danced and I bought her more drinks. I brought one for myself, but then spilled it — by accident. Right. She drank up and didn't notice that I wasn't. When I asked her to leave, she could barely nod.

We went to her place. See how smart I am, Kingston? *Her place*. Nobody at the bar knew me. They wouldn't find out. When we got to her house — a crap little duplex a few minutes from the bar — I could smell dog shit from the

porch. There was this poor little dog barking its head off. It ran outside to piss and stood there on the porch staring at me and barking like it was the end of the world. She yelled at it for crapping on the floor but was too drunk to do anything else. The dog had little spots...

On the ceiling before he closed the door to this room. I could see them. Spots like water where the plaster was worn away and it looked...

Like mange. Didn't matter. Just a puppy. Probably from a puppy mill. She was the kind of person who'd buy from one, I guess. She was the kind of person who'd get knocked up because she thought babies were cute. She wouldn't take responsibility for a life. She barely took responsibility for her own. I saw food stamps on the kitchen table. Food stamps? So where'd she get the money to go to the bar?

You don't know what you have until it's gone, right? Like you never appreciate walking until you're lying on a stone floor and in agonizing fucking pain. Or you don't know about life until you're walking around dead.

Pretty stupid platitude, I guess.

She took me into the bedroom. It smelled like old sex and dirty laundry. White-trash homes have a smell to them, just like old people's homes. Now that I think about it, they're sort of similar. Maybe because white trash is old and burnt out before their time?

She had a waterbed. I hate waterbeds. But I wasn't going to fuck her. I was there to feed. I didn't actually *think* that. It was like when you're 17 and on a date and you think she might put out but you don't want to even imagine it, because then you'll be disappointed when it doesn't happen. Except it wasn't like she could tell me no. I wasn't there to do anything *with* her. I was there to do it *to* her. I thought about that, like it was some kind of violation. She turned her back on me and slipped out of her jeans all sexy like...

Like a fucking dagger in the back. Shouldn't have tried to move. *Damn it.*

I bit her shoulder. She started to gasp like I was going down on her or something. I started thinking about her puppy and her food stamps and her useless life, and was just drinking slow at first, and she was squirming and moaning. I remembered how I felt when Kingston bit me and that just pissed me off.

Ever popped open a beer or a Coke and chugged it so fast it was gone before you knew it? So fast you just had to hold the can in your hand a second and marvel at what you'd done?

I did. When I finally let her fall to the bed. She barely jostled it.

See how smart I am, Kingston? I'll bet she smoked in bed all the time.

The neighbor next door took the puppy in. I actually went and checked. Aren't I smart?

DESCENT

I don't know if he ever found out about the woman. Fires happen. He knew I left, but I was back when he got home. I felt like I was sixteen again, sneaking out to meet a girl...

And drink her fucking dry. No, that's not it. I never did, but...

He didn't care. As long as no one knew.

PRESENTATION

It was another month before I met the rest of them. He had more shit to teach me. And I couldn't tell Liv about that either, but I could show her. I could walk into a room and make a girl want me. Or just want to talk. Maybe that's what Liv did to me. I wanted to talk. When I met the rest I wasn't allowed to say anything but...

"Your name." Like being in front of a judge. Great big chairs and me so small.

"John Samuels."

John Samuels is dead!

Jesus Christ man, get it together. Not dead. That's what Liv kept saying. Not dead. Still hope. Still...

Trapped. Felt trapped by those big chairs. They asked me other things, questions that Kingston taught me how to answer. I felt like I knew everything they wanted to know secondhand, like I'd heard a joke about it once, enough to know the answer they wanted, but standing there hoping to God they wouldn't press and ask me any more.

I'm a big failure as a vampire, huh? Scared or angry all the time. Not much different than being alive.

What the *hell* was that sound? Like a footstep or a light switch. Are they here? Jesus Christ, are they here? Those chairs and the men behind them?

Kids are afraid of their parents because they know their parents could get mad and kill them. Parents do it, you know. Read the news. Happens all the time. And it doesn't change for vampires. We're still scared. We're a race of Oedipus and Electras. See, Kingston, I read your fucking books.

ROUTINE

Oedipus tore out his own eyes. I know what that's like, to want to not see. Or to not feel. I wish I couldn't feel now. You can't imagine this fucking pain. Not like a knife. A knife is cold and clean. This is more like slamming your hand in a car door, but that instant of the slam lasts forever.

God, gotta quit thinking about it. I'll go crazy. Help me, okay?

Who the fuck am I talking to? The rats? One crawled over my chin a while ago. I think that was maybe what I heard. Just a rat. But I could feel it and I always laugh when I do that — except I can't — because I felt

something besides this pain. Fur against my face. That's different. Or maybe it's just been a while.

How come I can talk but I can't move? Am I talking?

I miss shaving. I used to shave in the shower. I know my face well enough that I don't need to see it to shave. Shaving in the shower was part of feeling clean. After Kingston killed me, I thought it was good that I'd showered that afternoon so I didn't have a permanent five-o'clock shadow. Wouldn't that suck? Knowing you'd never lose that bad haircut, those crooked teeth, that beer gut.

I've never met a vampire with a gut. Slimming diet? Laughing hurts. Even thinking about it hurts. Shit.

Every night it's the same. You wake up. You feed. You watch. You wait. I spend a lot of time in arcades. Kingston spends his time reading. I don't go to clubs much after what happened with the skank. I like coffee shops. I watch people talk. People are full of shit, but they're fun to watch. They think they know shit. And we just sit around and watch them, and sooner or later you start having to strain to talk to them. Like you're so far above them — or so far away — that they're speaking a different language. And you take their breath away.

I wish I could take a breath. But there's something in the way.

A couple times a week Kingston had me do stuff for him. Teach him how to run a computer program. Balance his books. Run an errand. I'm like a secretary, but I can't help feeling like he wanted me for something else. Why kill me if all he wanted was a secretary?

Maybe he just didn't want to have to go out. Maybe his old secretary died at 102 and he didn't want to have to adjust ever again.

Ever again. Think about that, rats. You'll never have rat-babies *ever again*. You'll never have to run from a cat *ever again*. All you are — but never ever again. It's worse for people, you know? Because people do so much that changes. No food, no booze, no sex, no sun, no wonder...

No wonder we all go crazy. No wonder we all need routine. That's why humans know so much about us. We're predictable as hell.

MYTHS

Kingston tells me about people inviting us in. I'd never heard that one. He tells me about garlic and crosses. "You never know," he says. We laughed about running water. But holy water?

Running holy water? Could a priest bless a river?

He said I had to be careful about myths, because sometimes they work. The night after he killed me, he told me to think of myself as human. After a year, I had trouble with that. The language was changing. After a

while you don't speak the same language as them anymore. And then he told me about the myths.

It would have helped if I'd read the Bible, I guess. Seemed like every other thing he said was a Bible quote. "Cain rose up." "God cursed so-and-so." "Angel Urinal came down and cursed." It's all about curses. How we're cursed, so sunlight hurts us and fire burns us. Doesn't fire burn everything? Kingston glared when I asked him that. Like I was interrupting a sermon. Like I'd throw off his speech if I asked questions.

It made me wonder if I have any big brothers or sisters. How many times have you made that speech, you son of a bitch?

I didn't expect an answer. Did something answer? I can still hear, right? Smell? Nope. Feel? Like a checklist. I know I can't see. What about the rest of it?

Sunlight, check. Garlic, check. Coffins, ha! Ha! Stakes through the heart... oh, yeah. That old story. Some things are true, some are false.

Immortal? You know, I actually went and looked that word up in the dictionary. "Not subject to death," it means. So why were most of the lessons about self-preservation? And besides, I had to die to become immortal, right? How much sense does that make?

So am I immortal? No. I'm subject to death. Every goddamned night I wake up dying again. I'm un-mortal. How about undead? That's easier to say. It's easy to see why a lot of us commit suicide within the first year. Kingston told me he chose me because I was strong.

Kingston told me a lot of things.

GOD

Kingston told me about God. "The more you know, the less you believe." His words. And then he'd tell me how he watched worship change. Within the Catholic Church alone. Imagine that. You're a little kid and every Sunday you hear Mass in Latin. And then one year, it changes to English, only by that time you're 50 years old. Every Sunday it's in English now, only you keep saying the bits in Latin, because that's how you learned it. Then, 40 years after that you go to Mass and there's a guy standing next to you, maybe 50 years old, who shakes his head and sighs right along with you, frustrated that the Latin is gone. He remembers it, just like you. He remembers when speaking out against the Church was fatal, and now people wear T-shirts with big cartoon devils on them.

"And God stays mum about the whole thing," Kingston reminds me. I knew that. Kingston thinks that God never really spoke to Noah and Abraham, and that maybe Jesus was just some guy who got caught up in things. And I agreed with him, because it's so damned hard to disagree with him.

But that was before. Now I think about Jesus on the cross and wonder how long it took Him to die. I think about nails piercing flesh and bone.

I think every moment is my last. I wish for it. Wish I could just be dead for real. Pretend I am. But of course I'm not.

I think maybe God doesn't speak to people nowadays because He's got nothing more to say. The world is a lie. Some of us find that out because of vampires. We get brought into the "real world," not a world of paychecks and deadlines like our parents warned us about, but a world of blood and patience. Maybe there's no room for God in that world.

Is it my imagination or does talking about God make the pain more bearable? I think it's my imagination. I don't think God knows where I am.

Maybe God's got more of a place in the *real* world. After all, miracles still happen here. Kingston can get a halo if he wants one. I can become strong like Samson. Liv can...

Save my soul? Die for my sins?

Oh, please, no. Not that. I... oh, God... my sins can stay. They can stay.

THIRD KILL

The first time was the woman Kingston brought me, but I don't know if that counts. Then the skank. Did she die for her own sins? Staying out too late, drinking and ignoring her dog? Are those sins punishable by death?

You judge people every day. I'm not a racist. Never was. But one day when I was about 20, some black dude cut me off in traffic and before I knew what I was saying, the words were there: "*Damn nigger.*"

I still judge people. It's just the way people see things: in their own terms. And some folks go through life thinking that their terms are wrong and sinful, and others think theirs is the way. Others don't really care about right or wrong.

A vampire is *always* in the last group. We don't care about right and wrong. We care about blood and living to see tomorrow. And that means that if you ever try to see things from other folks' perspective, you stop.

It was almost a year before I killed again. It was one week to the day before I met Livia. I was at a coffee shop hitting on this pretty...

Soon I'm going to scream. Pretty soon. Pain... just... why when I try to think about Livia? Or death? Why does it flare up then?

Girl was reading *The Prince*, and I said I'd read it. And soon we were chatting and then this guy came in and started glaring at us. Her ex, she said. And then suddenly he gets this look in his eye like he *knows* me. And he comes straight for me holding out a cross.

Kingston was wrong. God's around. He's just got a fucked up sense of timing.

I don't know why, but it pushed me back until I was up against the window. Was I just scared? Startled?

Some people around us actually started clapping. They thought it was a show. Like poetry night, right? The girl grabbed his shirt and pulled him back. I ran to my car.

I killed the first time out of anger. I killed that guy because he...

I guess it'd be macho of me to say, "He pissed me off" or "Stole my dinner" or some shit like that. No. That night I finally understood Kingston and all his bullshit about self-preservation. I understood being scared. The guy scared me. So I waited for him to leave. Parked in a lot across the street from the coffee shop. The guy finally left — alone — and I tailed him to a college campus. I followed him to a computer lab.

3:01 A. M. on the desktop clock. One other guy in the lab. The kid sat with his back to the door. How stupid can you be? I told the guy in the lab to fuck off and he did.

I do what Kingston says when he glares, too. It's not a hard trick.

I grabbed the kid from behind and crushed his throat. I picked him up and helped him to his car like he was drunk. I left him there and went back to the computer room because there was something on the computer that I didn't...

Hear it. I did hear it. There's something else fucking down here with me! Hunters? Do hunters hunt... vampires?

Hunters on the net? Is that what I saw?

The computer was on a porn site when I got back. I turned it off, then went back out, pulled him out of the car and beat his body with a tire iron. Gang-jumped. Shit happens.

I couldn't recognize the kid when I walked away. I wish — can I think this? Is it allowed or does it make me pussy? I wish I could have let him go. Him or me? The kid was protecting a girl. He was right. I was wrong. But I was stronger and smarter.

I asked Kingston about humans and if any really *know*. He said they shouldn't, and if they do we should silence them. It's funny to watch Kingston dance. Silence, Kindred, feed. Kill, vampire, drink blood. But he said there used to be humans who knew, and they tried to kill us. He said they only found the stupid ones. He says luck doesn't matter. Neither does determination on humans' part. Just stupid vampires getting burnt to a crisp because they fucked up.

So it's all about us. Selfish bastard. We see things from our own point of view. It could never be that people want to survive and *not* be sucked dry, right, you asshole? No, it's got to be about us, the kings of the fucking world.

That's why I'm different from Kingston. I think it's all about *them*. I guess I always did. He tried to burn that out of me. Tried to burn away my humanity. Held me up by my heel and burned it away but missed a spot.

Greek myths are all about sex and blood and pain. Sisyphus on the mountain. Tantalus in the water. Samuels in the basement. All because he missed a spot. And a week after crucifix-boy died, Liv found me.

LIVIA

I met her one week to the day after my third kill. I remember nightmares. That whole week every time I'd sleep I'd have nightmares. I'd dream that I was in a coffee shop, walking from table to table looking for food, but everybody was blond or male, and they all had crucifixes and they'd hold them out. And then I'd dream of fire in my...

Chest is fucking killing me. You break your leg and it subsides to a dull ache. Every goddamned second of this is...

Torture. Sleep deprivation is torture. Food deprivation is torture. Sensory deprivation — you know they use that as therapy? Bullshit. Try taking away someone's senses and then hooking electric current up to him. You don't get used to it. How long before the victim passes out from the pain?

What if the victim can't pass out? Or can't die? Or can't...

Liv. A week later and still dreaming of the guy with the crucifix. Some vampire, huh? I avoided coffee shops altogether and stuck to clubs and bars. I was hungry as hell because I barely fed enough to wake up every evening. If a hunter found me then, I'd have been fucked. I'd have been one of the stupid vampires that Kingston talks about. Too stupid to come in out of the rain?

That's what she said to me. She asked me if I was too stupid to come in out of the rain. I was standing in the parking lot of a coffee shop, trying to make up my mind to go in. She was standing under the awning, smoking. I was glad she said it, because it pissed me off. I thought I could drink her, even though I don't like smokers' blood. Kind of chalky and...

God, am I bleeding? Jesus, what then? Do I bleed until I can't even talk or *think*? I can't feel under me so I don't know how bad it is. I've never been shot or stabbed, and I don't know if we still bleed. We don't piss. We don't cum. Do we bleed?

Why does it hurt so bad to think about Livia? Fuck the pain. I can do it. I need to do it. Maybe she can help. But it's like before, when you don't want to think about it because you might jinx yourself.

I don't believe in jinxes.

Liv and I sat down, she drank her coffee and we talked. She spoke the fucking language. I didn't feel like I was talking to a baby or a pet. I felt like I was talking to a person.

No, wait, because I'm not a person. I felt like a person. With Liv. That's what it was. Not that she was different. It was that she made me feel different.

She knew the guy with the crucifix. Knew about him, anyway. Mentioned it to me, that he'd been jumped and beaten to death in the campus parking lot the same night he'd pulled out a crucifix and assaulted some guy. I had to laugh — "assaulted." He couldn't have assaulted me if he tried.

So why did you kill him, asshole?

He did assault me. But he was right. He stepped to me and I folded. And Liv knew it. She knew about him and me.

She said the word, Kingston, not me. She called me out, right there in the coffee shop but quietly. "Are you a vampire?"

What the fuck do you say to that? What would you have said, Kingston? You'd have glared at her and told her to forget all about you. I tried that. It didn't work. She just sat back in her chair and glared back.

You know that nightmare where you're naked at school or on stage and can't remember a line? Or when you're falling? If you die in the dream, do you really die? If you say, "Yes," will she run screaming or pull out a crucifix?

I wanted to know. God, I just wanted to *talk* to someone again!

So I said, "Yes." And then, "Now what?"

DECLARATION

Now — then — we left the coffee shop and went to the campus library to a study room. The whole time my mind was yelling, "Kill her!" See, Kingston, I'm not so dumb. It was on the tip of my tongue. But I couldn't because she was...

Liv. We sat down with books about vampires and she asked me to tell her the truth. I remembered about secrecy and I *tried* to lie, but it was either tell the truth or say nothing at all. Most of the time I said nothing. She'd asked, "True about sunlight?" All I could do was think about Kingston and him glaring at me and his words sinking into my head. He must have done that every night for weeks, glared at me while he talked about staying quiet, except...

Except he wasn't speaking. Wait a minute. He wasn't speaking but the words were there.

Mother *fucker*. He was training me.

Are you there, Kingston? You were training me? You were controlling me and hypnotizing me not to talk? Can you fucking hear me?

No, he can't, you idiot. You aren't talking. Silence, remember? You haven't heard anything but the rats and the...

Hunters. I asked her about hunters. She kind of stammered and told me that some folks hear the voice of God and God tells them shit. And I'm thinking, *I knew it. I knew He still talks. He brings people into the real world.*

But it wasn't like I could really explain it. Every time I tried, I'd feel like my mouth was full. Like my mind was a blood clot. Kingston, damn you. You stole my tongue and crushed my mind, but I still told her...

What I wanted. Liv. I told Liv what I wanted. Liv. I wanted...

To live.

POSSIBILITIES

Like an alcoholic saying, "I've got a drinking problem." I wanted to live. Liv said she'd help me if I helped her. She didn't want to kill us. She wanted to...

I never believed in redemption. I still don't. Maybe this is Purgatory. Maybe if I believe, I'll be free.

I believe! *I believe!*

I didn't buy it, either. Not at first. But she told me things. She could take my hand and know things about me that I'd almost forgotten. Stuff about my job and my friends and my girl.

Jesus, I had a girl when all this shit started, back when I was alive. What the fuck was her name?

It was Joan. Liv reminded me about Joan. But it was all someone else's life. She needed some way to make it real for me, she said. It was too long ago — really more like *too much* ago, if that makes any sense.

The night she showed me the video, it started to sink in, I think. She wasn't the only one. There were others like her, but not. Like, most of them are soldiers and she's the medic. Or the priest. Something like that. And they *are* on the net! I remember now. I remember her rattling off some web address once, in passing, and I just let it go, but that crucifix kid knew about it. She said sometimes they just *know* things. Like about that site or about people who are dead.

Like me, I guess. Only she always called me...

John. I can't remember when somebody called me by my first name. Kingston always said "Samuels," and so did most of my friends. She said, "Here, John, watch the video. Maybe this will help."

The video was of hunters killing a vampire. Real hunters. Like her. One of them held out a crucifix. I think I would have pissed myself, if I could have. The vampire — I didn't know him, but Kingston said later on that one of the big guy's childer was missing. I didn't say anything.

Least, I don't think I did. I don't know when I talk to Kingston.

They killed the vampire. Forced him back and locked him in place somehow. Held him there and burned him. The guy carrying the camera zoomed in on him as he burned. The vampire was screaming something in Spanish or Italian or something. I caught the word "inferno" or something like that. Liv said he was afraid of going to hell.

Liv was outside. The guy with the camera kept it on, and it was like the screen was bouncing as he ran and then Liv's face filled the frame and she said, "You didn't let me talk to him. I could have saved him," and shit like that. Then she stormed off. Cut. That's a wrap.

So that's what happens if they...

Found me? Have they? I heard it. Oh, shit, I heard it that time. I can't move. They're going to burn me oh God it's...

Nothing. Just a door upstairs. Kingston going out. I don't know what time it is or how long I've been down here. I can't sleep like this. Must be nighttime...

Liv told me that they'd come for me and try to burn me. Must have been night, but somehow I remember it being bright. Wasn't the study room. Must have been the second time we met, at her place. I should have killed her that first time, but I wanted something from her. I wanted her to save me. She said maybe she could.

After the video, after watching that vampire burn, I didn't care if she could. I knew she would try. I was scared again, just like with the crucifix, but I didn't know who any of the hunters were. The only one I knew was Liv.

Yes, I fucking confess. I was going to play along and get to the others. Give them to Kingston as a surprise. I don't know. Maybe give Kingston to them. I'd never do that. I'd never think it.

I'd never end up someone's bitch, but look at me now.

So I could be hunted or I could be saved. Liv said she'd hide me from the others, keep them off track while she worked with me. After about a month, I didn't care about the others anymore. I didn't want them dead. I wanted to live. It wasn't about me. It wasn't about survival. It was about...

Redemption. It's possible? Will these stains come out?

Oh, that's right. I have to get a new shirt.

LEARNING

It was five months between the night Liv showed me that video and the night I ended up down here. We'd meet twice a week. Never on the same days. We agreed that she wouldn't give away any personal stuff. But after a while, you know, you pick things up.

I knew she was in school, and I suspected that she worked at the library, because she'd shelve books kind of on reflex. I knew she liked coffee because it was always on her breath, but that she didn't smoke much, because she didn't fidget like real smokers do. We'd talk for hours.

We tried out everything. Holy water, garlic, crosses, running water, salt, roses, everything. Only things I wouldn't let her try were sunlight and stakes. We both agreed that Kingston was just being paranoid or misleading about fire, because, duh, fire burns everything. She

wrote it all down. She knows what works, even if I can't think or say it now or then because that fucking douche bag made a clay bowl with my mind. I remember some of it. Holy water stung a little, but then she's not a priest. Salt looked confusing, but I didn't feel like counting it — maybe because I'm not Chinese?

But I learned to play "Go." That's Japanese. Never mind.

The rose hurt. The rose on my chest hurt. The thorns hurt. She wrote that down.

She asked me questions, and I tried. I think I talked about that already. Talked about it — I can't even lick my lips. I can't talk. The echoes are my imagination. Aren't they?

I missed a meeting with Liv. I've been down here that long, I'm sure I have. The only time she missed a meeting with me, I went to her apartment and looked up at her window like a junkie missing a fix.

She learned a lot from me. I think the rest of them, the big men in their big chairs, would burn me for talking. I know they would. I think Liv's friends would burn me for being what I am.

What I am? Shit. What I fucking am?

I asked her that once! I asked her, does it make any difference that I am what I am because Kingston liked the way I played "Go"? I'm not a killer who chose this! I'd go back if I could. I would. But that's not possible, is it?

My face, what's wrong with... just the roof leaking. Except I'm in the basement. Fuck.

Vampires cry blood. I found that out. Real pussy. But if it's not possible to go back, what then? She said I could...

Liv. No. That isn't what she said. She said I could...

Die clean. Die with a clean soul.

What the fuck does a human know about dying? I said that and she just smiled, and I knew I was just bluffing because I was scared. She said, "I may not know about dying but I know about clean."

I learned about clean souls from her. And I think what we agreed on was that some things just shouldn't happen. Some things just *should not be*. Maybe I'm one of them.

THE PLAN

We worked it out. Figured it out. Everybody I'd ever fed on. It took us months, both of us working on it, but we figured out who they all were. Some of them — the waterbed girl, the crucifix guy — were easy and some of them I could barely remember.

I didn't feed on the crucifix guy. His name was George. I didn't feed on him, but he was still a victim. He was protecting Celina Hartson, and so Liv made me pray for her, too.

The first woman, the one that Kingston got me when he killed me, she was hard to find. I had to bring Liv here to figure that one out. And we know what happened then.

We don't. I do. When we were here at the house...

At the house? No, it was burned down. Different house. Waterbed house. Remember? I burned it so it would look like she was smoking. She had no family and her name was Nancy...

Nancy...what? Nancy Marks. And her puppy was living with a neighbor and wasn't patchy anymore.

Pray for the souls of your victims, if you wish.

Kingston's words.

But it's just a parental phrase. "Stop or I'll turn this car around." They don't mean it.

But I did it. We found them all and I prayed for them all. Nancy Marks, amen. George Satow, amen. Celina Hartson, amen. I believe, *I believe*.

We figured it all out. Not remorse. Who cares if I feel guilty, I asked Liv. They're still dead. And she said remorse isn't the point. Acceptance and repentance. You fucked up and you know it.

So what do you do when you've said you're sorry? Wait for the ray of light from heaven?

Something like that.

BETRAYAL

But I meant it. Swear to God. Cross my heart...

My heart is fucking crossed. I meant it. I meant the prayers but she still thought I was using her when it all came down. She knew I was lying but I didn't know I was lying because of Kingston and his goddamned stare.

She asked, "Is that all?" I said yes, but it wasn't. I was forgetting the very first one because all I'd seen was blood and light...

Was that a light? I can't see anything now, but I swear I just saw a light. But not like fire. Not even a light bulb. More like the light on a...

Computer. We got on the computer and traced back through obituaries from the day I died. I remember the date. Kingston didn't change my mind on that. We didn't find anything. So who was she? I don't know. Liv didn't believe me. Thought I was hiding it, but I swear to her, I swear. I never knew her. I never knew her name. She was just a meal that Kingston brought me.

Liv said, "If we go to where she died, I can try to find out."

I said, "That's a trap."

No. I said, "Okay, come with me."

I thought it was a trap.

I knew it was.

Oh, God, I led her here.

LAST RITES

It was nearly midnight when we got here. Last night. A year ago. Shit, I don't know anymore.

She started looking around like she wanted to find a piece of that woman. Clothing. Anything. But it'd been more than a year. What was going to be left?

So she said I'd have to remember it for her.

Sure thing. No problem. Oh, God, fucking pull out my heart. I said I wouldn't remember this. I didn't want to but...

I did it. I told her all about it, about dying, about the light I saw, and she liked that — knew she would. I told her about the woman. That was the hard part, remembering, remembering that first time then having to tell Liv about that awful gutted feeling I had. And then Liv...

Fell. God, what just fell? Heard something upstairs. Something fell. Kingston! Kingston, you home? Let me out. I'll be good. I'll be...

Liv. She fell because someone shot her. Small gun. Not fatal. Not much blood. They knew she'd be there. They fucking followed her, but who betrayed who? Did she bring me there to kill me and Kingston or did I bring her there to kill her and her friends?

FOURTH KILL

The fucker who shot her died first. I grabbed a sculpture-thing off Kingston's coffee table and threw it. He looked surprised, then dead. I heard more of them. I pulled Liv into the room and laid her on the couch. She looked okay, just out and in pain. She was whispering something. A prayer. I didn't know it. I stroked her face. Her hair wasn't naturally brown. That's maybe what saved her way back when. Never met a girl who dyed her hair brown before. Like she wasn't normal enough. I only feed on brunettes. She wasn't.

Did she trick me? Did I trick her? Myself? I never fed on her, did I? I couldn't have.

I got up and went into the hallway. Right over where I am now, I think. I could hear a car running outside. I looked out the window. I saw a gray SUV. I saw it before, in the video.

They used night goggles. She told me that. I remember night-sights. My brother brought a pair home once. He was in the service. Night-sights are useless when every lamp in the house and a bunch of ceiling lights suddenly come on. So I flipped a panic switch. Hunters don't expect vampires to like bright light. I picked up the gun from the dead guy. Still loaded, .22. So they planned this. They knew. They knew they were gonna shoot Liv.

FIFTH KILL

The second hunter was in the kitchen. He had a cross out. I felt him push me back, but I wasn't more than six feet away when I shot him. Twenty-twos look like rabbit turds, but at that range, a bullet's a bullet. He fell over. I still felt like he was pushing me back.

I'd never shot anybody before. I felt it all slipping away. All the prayers and time I'd spent. I knew there were more of them somewhere, but I couldn't hunt them down. I just couldn't. What if they were right? What if I *shouldn't be*? I shouldn't be...

Talking. How am I talking? Can I hear myself? The echoes? I don't think I'm really talking. I think I'm hallucinating.

I think I've been here for months. If so, then Kingston moved the bodies.

I moved the body. It left a bloody trail in my head. No, across the kitchen floor, and I stopped because I remembered Liv. I ran back to the room she was in and she was trying to sit up. She was bleeding from the bullet wound. She was whispering.

I couldn't hear when I walked in. I tried to help her up but she grabbed me and then I knew.

"Harry Ballew," she said. "Jim Turner."

The two men I'd just killed.

She hadn't given up, so I'm damned if I'm going to.

Yeah, probably. Damnation is like this, like constant pain and fire.

But it's worse, says Liv in my head. She always said stuff like that. I hope she's still alive.

I sat with her for hours. Maybe not. Maybe just long enough to get the names. I prayed again. Harry Ballew, amen. Jim Turner, amen. The-woman-who-died-in-this-room, amen.

Sandra Atkins, amen. I don't know how Liv figured it out. But I was praying for the other two and she grabbed my hand all excited and said "Sandra Atkins." I started praying again. And then we stood up, and I felt...

KINGSTON

A door opened. There was Kingston. He raised a gun. Liv shouted. He missed. I stepped back because he made me. He fired again. Liv shouted. He missed again. He came closer.

She looked at me.

A million years in that look. A million prayers. A million victims quieted. What the hell is Liv? Not like the ones who want to kill. Doing God's work, maybe, but Liv never wanted to kill me as much as she wanted me to figure it out.

I think maybe I did. I grabbed Kingston and threw him out the window. It's only a short drop to the ground. But Liv had time to run. I had to stay. I couldn't run out with Kingston around. He might get angry. He might get...

Liv. She told me to finish it. She ran — still stumbling, still bleeding — and I saw her get into the SUV — but not driving? Someone else. In the video there were four of them, not counting Liv. I only killed two.

Only.

She told me to finish it, and to pray for Kingston before I did.



Kingston came back. I heard him crash through the door. I don't know how Liv got by him. He came into the room and his stone wall face changed to disappointment. I wanted to die for failing him. To die clean for Liv.

Is what I feel for him love? For Liv? I can't love Liv. I can't...

Liv. He walked forward and asked me what the hell I was doing. I think I told him. Not like I could resist. But I knew so God-damned much! I knew Liv's address, the names of the dead men. I knew what God said to her.

One word. "Clean."

THE BASEMENT

I stopped talking to Kingston. I got on my knees and started praying for everybody again. So fast I couldn't even understand the words.

Nancymarksamengeorgesatowamencelina hartsonamenliviasellersamenharriballewamen kingstonamen. I think I got all the way to Kingston before he hit me.

He looked at me hard again. Really hard. That's when the pain started. He threw me in the basement in the dark. It's like a sensory deprivation chamber.

You can't hear. When you can't hear, you can't tell if you're talking.

...if you're talking.

What the fuck was that? My own voice. I heard it. I know I did, but not like an echo like a...

Recording. Oh, God. But who? Who's recording? Who knows I'm here?

Kingston. Liv. The hunters. Too many.

So what do they know? What have I said? How much was in my head and how much have I said?

Come out, fuckers! Come out! I'm not saying anything else.

What's that? Heard a voice. Not mine. Heard someone say...

"Die clean."

Right. I prayed for all the victims. Who's left?

Oh, yeah.

Our Father who art in heaven...

I heard a door. Upstairs. Could someone be listening?

Hallowed be thy name.

Father? Kingston? Dad? I just want to say I'm sorry, but fathers never buy it. "I'll turn this car around." They lie, so they think you lie.

Thy kingdom come...

Oh, God, please. Let it. I don't want this forever. I didn't mean for all this. How much was me and how much was Kingston's stare? I asked Liv that once. She

Drake:

I received this tape in the mail. Specifically, it was in my mailbox at work. It had no markings on it other than my name. The mail clerk doesn't recall putting it there. Give it a listen and tell me how genuine you think it is. There are several stops and starts, usually when "Samuels" starts raving about hearing something. I admit that the emotion in his voice sounds real, but then, we've all been moved by actors, right?

I'll tell you a few things I know: As "Samuels" points out - conveniently, I think - sensory deprivation does make you hallucinate. Also, if you can't hear yourself, you do tend to babble because you can't tell you're actually speaking. Makes sense so far, right? But I've read transcripts of actual sensory deprivation cases (they do use it for therapy and some folks do it to relax!). The transcripts are rarely as orderly or as linear as this (and this isn't all that orderly, I know). However, notice how the speaker slips around with events, time and tense (sensory deprivation subjects often lose track of time; minutes seem like hours). He generally seems agitated - but never once seems out of breath.

Nowhere in this tape does "Samuels" mention the address of "Livia," or even her last name, unless it's in that jumble of names near the end (see what you think, you're the electronics genius). However, his description does sound a bit like the "Livia" we know (and honestly, how many women by that name have you met?). I've found no mention of any of these events on hunter-net, even though "Samuels" refers to it on the tape. Of course, since few folks mention their city by name, it's possible that I might have missed it. There are other names mentioned, and running them through various news feeds, I found that George Satow died on the Ohio State University campus. Likewise, Nancy Marks' home burned down a few months before Satow's murder. However, if Ballew and Turner actually did die in "Kingston's" house, I can find no record of their deaths. Both are currently listed as missing persons (Turner's wife is still going nuts, and I haven't found the courage - or the right way - to tell her). Of course, if they did die in a rot's home, it would probably have disposed of the bodies pretty thoroughly. I haven't been able to contact Livia lately, either, and I don't know who the driver of the van was. I sure as hell wasn't there. It wasn't you, was it?

Finally, check out the clipping I've enclosed. It casts some credibility on the whole thing. But I still find myself wondering: Was somebody set up here? Who, and who was behind it? Kingston? Samuels? Us? The "men in the chairs" - possibly a kind of ruling body among bloodsuckers? I have to admit I'm a little confused. I always say, "If something happens and you don't know why, ask yourself who benefits from it." Frankly, I can't figure out who wins by sending me this tape. If it's from another one of us, why not include a way to contact him? If it's from a rot, there's enough information here to give us an edge - assuming any of it's valid. After all, our own experience with vampires only confirms that they burn, and like "Samuels" says, everything burns. Some of the other precautions he mentions - salt (the assumption being that a vampire will stop and count the grains), roses (which supposedly immobilize a vampire if placed on its chest), and the other more familiar ones - are difficult to test in the field. Livia might well have tested them, but why hasn't she shared it with us? Is she in the hospital? I haven't heard from her. Anyway, the holes in the story and the general convenience of it all lead me to believe that part or all of this was faked.

I would really like to believe that Samuels found God and "died clean," but I'm reminded of that woman in Texas who killed people with an ax and then found Jesus in prison. Do last-minute conversions count? And is this even a genuine conversion? Samuels admits to falling under what sounds like mind control by Kingston. Don't you think that would confuse your judgment when it comes to prayer and redemption?

Anyway, this tape raises more questions than it answers. Until I do some more poking around, I'm not going to post a transcript on the net.

Let me know what you think.

- Reynolds

COLUMBUS — Police were called to the scene of house fire at 2134 Brighton Ave. after emergency workers discovered a mutilated body on the premises.

Firefighters arrived to battle the blaze around 5:00 AM. They brought the fire under control by midmorning, after which arson investigators found a decapitated corpse in the basement.

Although police have not released the identity of the body, they said interviews with neighbors led them to believe it is not that of homeowner Alfred Kingston, whom authorities wish to question. A police spokesman said the body was that of a white male who had been dead for roughly a year preceding the fire.

said that if I didn't know, I had to assume it was all me. Harsh, but safer that way.

Thy will be done...

Tell me what to do. Tell me who else to pray for. Who else's soul is on my conscience? I'll do it. I'll be clean.

On Earth as it is in Heaven.

Maybe God just doesn't know what to say. Just a word. Please.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us...

I can't get the words out. Forgive us our trespasses.

I hope. No way to know until the light. Just have to trust and pray and forgive...

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

I forgive you, Kingston. I forgive you. You didn't bring out anything in me that wasn't already there. I was a monster before I was a vampire. Nothing is inevitable. It's not all about them or us. It's all about...

And lead us not into temptation...

Footsteps on the stairs. Better make this quick.

But deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, now and forever...

Key in the door. Light. God, light. You. Yeah. Do it.

Now and forever.

Amen.



CHAPTER 4: THE NIGHTMARE IS REAL

Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them.

— Deuteronomy 7:11

MEIER ARCHITECTURE

February 11

To Mr. Rifkind:

Kindly keep your janitorial staff in line. I have expressed time and again that, due to the delicate responsibilities to which I attend for the Meier architectural firm, I am not to be disturbed. I keep an office on the twelfth floor to be used during off hours so that your clean-up crew may attend to the site manager's trailer, where my daytime office is located.

Should you need to reach me, you have numerous numbers, including a cell phone, pager, office numbers and even personal numbers. There is no excuse for the repeated disruption caused by your staff. If they deem it absolutely necessary to exercise their duties in my office, then please make arrangements with me ahead of time.

Both the Meier firm and my own consultation company have called upon Brightways Custodial Services numerous times in the past and have never before had a problem with them. Having addressed these concerns previously, I cannot help but note a growing degree of dissatisfaction with the current direction of the staff's behavior. While I have reservations against making threats, if the nature of our relationship does not improve, we will be forced to terminate our contract and seek the services of a company that finds it possible to comply with our needs and desires.

Sincerely,

Thomas Arturo

TA/prb

Rifkind, You Toad:

Quite simply, what is your problem? Are you growing more and more inept as each night passes? Has some unfortunate notion of autonomy gripped your mind? Are you testing the limits to which I will allow you to stray?

You need me, Rifkind. You need me not only for the contracts I provide that allow you to live your life, but you need me for that one thing I provide that others do not — I am your sustenance. Do not forget that. When I was younger and in your place, I counted myself lucky that my own domitor was enlightened enough to not have me call her "Mistress." Should I resort to that, Rifkind? Should I have you call me "Master" to prove your devotion? Or will I be forced to withhold my gift like a jealous lover abstaining from intimacy?

I know it makes you squirm when I say things like that, Rifkind. But, you see, I am in a position to behave in such a manner. You would do well to remember that you are in a position only to serve.

I am not a difficult person. I rarely hold anything over you. All I ask in return for my patronage is a small degree of competency and — you choose which word fits best — devotion or availability. I do not force you to jump through hoops. You have seen some of the others of your kind interact with their masters. I do not dress you like a buffoon and I give you your due in private, never forcing you to abase yourself. Do I need to take these steps? I should hope not.

You will find in your file at Brightways a letter of complaint. Consider this a mild warning. I understand that you will be relieved of your employment at that company should another grievance be filed against you. That stands doubly in your relationship with me — I will not hesitate to cut the vital line that connects us if you fail me again.

TA

February 17

Hellene,

Please understand that I'm doing all I can to assure you a place in the Gateway. The ultimate decision doesn't rest with me, however, as the building is being handled by Meier and a third-party real-estate agent. I can make suggestions, of course, but as it stands, I'm hesitant to push someone to the head of the line because that means asking a favor of Meier — and I'm sure you know that favors don't come cheaply.

What it comes down to, then, is making such a thing worth the rub I would have to invoke to put it in motion. I can get you in, but the degree of difficulty makes it so that I must ask for more in return than we had initially discussed.

I'm loath to speak in such a mercenary tone, but I know you understand. The Kindred are not alone in their transfers of favors and boons, and believe me, real estate draws bloodsuckers of its own ilk, especially in this city.

As it stands, we have a few options, which I will outline for your consideration and put into play depending upon your tastes.

First, I can put your name on the list, plain and simple. This would not guarantee you a property in the Gateway, but it would definitely place you above the hundreds of others jockeying for position to even have their names committed to paper. This is a minor concern, and one that I would handle for you without need of reciprocation.

Second, I can put in a word for you with one of the real estate agents. This is also a minor affair that I can address with no difficulty, although, again, it is no guarantee. This will place you centrally in the bidding war with any number of other prospective tenants, limited only by your means. This places you at risk, however, as it will draw attention from media covering the progress of the Gateway. While I'm sure it would please you to see your name appear in the society and even business pages, I'm sure you know that sometimes all it takes is that brief mention to encourage curious parties to look into your history. I don't know how well you've covered yourself, but discretion is almost always the better part of valor. I wouldn't want tax inquiries turning up the fact that I'm no longer the man I once was. I'm sure you take my meaning.

Finally, I have a man of mine working inside the Meier partnership, at whose recommendation and one of my own, we can almost unequivocally place you in the Gateway. The problem here is that it will mean my giving up a favor Meier owes me. I'm afraid I have no recourse but to ask for a third Kiss from you if you choose to have me undertake this, so great is the sacrifice required to satisfy this course of action.

I'm involved with numerous other projects where I can much more easily attain a condominium for you. Naturally, they don't have the prestige that this particular location does. I have no doubt you understand that, as much as you find the Gateway desirable. Not that I'm asking you to "settle" for anything less — we can work this out, given the resources and commitment to the goal itself.

With Kindest Regards,

Thomas

March 8

Arturo: Bruce? Are you there? It's me.

Rifkind: Yes, sir?

Arturo: Are you in the office? Or are you on one of the common-area phones?

Rifkind: No, sir. I'm in the office. By myself.

Arturo: We have a problem, Bruce. One of your crew was... in a place he shouldn't have been. I've been in a particularly hungry mood of late, as I'm sure you know.

Rifkind: I know, sir. What's the problem, exactly?

Arturo: Well, your employee is no longer with us. (Long pause)

Arturo: Bruce?

Rifkind: I'm trying to figure out what we should do, sir.

Arturo: Don't bother thinking. I've already got it worked out. What I need is for you to leave the site. Get out. Go back to the Brightways office and say you're dropping off payroll or picking up HR packets or something. I'm going to contrive an accident and I don't want you around to take the blame or to have to make a statement.

Rifkind: Are you sure, sir? I mean, I'm supposed to be on site until the crew leaves.

Arturo: Didn't you hear me?

Rifkind: Of... yes, sir, but even if I'm not held accountable for the accident, I'm going to be accountable to the office if I wasn't actually here, sir. That's the reason they hire supervisors, to make sure that—

Arturo: Don't patronize me. Get yourself to that office. Tell them you need some temporary employment enrollment forms — tell them you need extra manpower tonight and you're hiring temps from the site's scab pool. That'll corroborate the accident. It'll look like there was so much work to be done somebody messed up and got hurt.

Rifkind: All right, sir. If that's what you want. I still think—

Arturo: It doesn't matter what you think. I call the shots here, understand? Just do what you're told. Now.

Rifkind: Yes, sir.

Arturo: Give me at least two hours. When you return, come up and see me. I'll tell you the cover story.

Rifkind: Consider it done, sir.

March 10

TO: Mr. Bruce Rifkind

FROM: Thomas Arturo

RE: Rosendo Cabrera, et. al.

CONFIDENTIAL

Mr. Rifkind:

Pursuant to the unfortunate events of 8 March, we are forced to make a few adjustments to the current staffing environment provided by Brightways Custodial Services. What follows is a list of employees to be terminated and a brief synopsis of other actions to be undertaken on the authority of Thomas Arturo by Mr. Bruce Rifkind. Allow these employees to serve approximately two more weeks of their contracts and then begin the process of their termination.

The termination of the following Brightways employees is to be effective by 31 March.

Jesus Degetau — Two shifts' severance pay; no benefits.

Luis Castaño — Two shifts' severance pay; no benefits.

Sila Muñoz — Two shifts' severance pay; no benefits (notwithstanding current insurance claim 36093133-6).

Hector Echeverria — No severance pay; no benefits. Echeverria has been overheard speaking to other employees about the nature of the death of Mr. Cabrera, speculating that unwholesome forces seem to be moving behind the scenes. This sort of conspiratorial rabble-rousing is unbecoming of an employee, contract or otherwise, and serves only to undermine the morale of employees who will still devote their services to Brightways and the Gateway contract.

John McCormick — No severance pay; no benefits. McCormick is a known alcoholic and has been witnessed imbibing alcohol during shift hours. Terminating McCormick's employment comes as a result of this infraction of rules and safety precautions, as well as a known association with Echeverria. McCormick's tongue will remain silent so long as it is obvious to him that the reasons for his termination are alcohol-related — he will not speak up for fear of being given a damning reference in the future.

Orlando Calderon — Two shifts' severance pay; no benefits, although benefits may continue through extension of wife Ynez's benefits. The wife shall remain employed by Brightways under contract to Meier Architecture Group, LLC. Under this arrangement, the wife will remain quiet in order to remain employed and the terminated husband will keep quiet so as not to jeopardize the couple's sole avenue of income. Should Ynez Calderon become a problem in the future, immediate termination shall occur with immediate cessation of pay and benefits.

The \$50 per employee distributed as a loyalty retainer on 8 March is to be taken from the petty cash account maintained by Meier Architecture Group, LLC and logged as a custodial supply disbursement.

Additional awareness of employees at this point is necessary. Those overheard to be gossiping about the unfortunate events of 8 March are to be terminated without warning, so that they may be made examples to their fellow employees.

Those employees who have been relieved of duties are to be escorted from the work site at the time of their release.

TA

Rifkind — Take care of this. I will be down to join you for as many of the releases as I can, so that I might judge the mental state of those let go in this fashion. When you are done, destroy this document, as I don't want records of our motivations left lying around for curious eyes to notice.

MEIER ARCHITECTURE

MARCH 16

Ugly Vampire: Don't play all high-and-mighty with me, Arturo. You can't even keep your own haven under control.

Arturo: I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

Ugly Vampire: Your haven. It's not news. Everyone knows you've been staying at the Gateway building.

Arturo (laughing): You're suggesting that I'm making my haven there because I don't have one anywhere else?

Ugly Vampire: That's the word. And you've had an accident recently. We don't know what it is yet, but give us some time and we'll turn it up.

Arturo (laughing): It was indeed an accident. Certainly you know that I'm an architect. I'm overseeing the completion of a project. I've signed on with one of the kine's companies to consult. Perhaps having a job or responsibilities is foreign to one such as you, whose only priorities seem to be accumulating new reserves of stench, but for those of us who make actual contributions to the world we share with our vessels, we must exert an actual effort. I have an office on the site and nothing more. Ask a few of the others here. I've taken them there as they're interested in purchasing property at that location.

Ugly Vampire: And about your accident?

Arturo: As I mentioned before, it was merely an accident. It's a construction site. Such things happen. You don't think I'd speak about it freely if I had something to hide, do you? For all your kind's skill at digging up information and comparing it to others in your blighted little network, you don't seem to be very good at it.

Ugly Vampire: I heard that you had one of your employees murdered.

Arturo: I'm afraid you heard wrong. I personally made a statement to the police when they came to investigate. The only functioning elevators we have right now are the construction elevators on the outside of the building. The shafts inside the building don't have any cars in them yet. One of the night staff was clearing out some of the day's debris from the shaft in preparation for having the elevators' cables spindled. He failed to securely fasten his harness to the safety bulkhead. He lost his balance and fell. Snoop about the hospital's records, if you wish. He was taken to St. Vincent's. It's simple human error. And I'm afraid that sort of thing is far more common than one looking for fingers to point cares to consider. In fact, I'm sure that this vaunted information grapevine of yours would become quite the laughingstock if our fellows found out that the information it yields is made up, reported without accuracy or otherwise... of little value.

Ugly Vampire: Wait. That's what I was doing. I was checking facts. I was making sure it was real.

Arturo: Oh, were you? Then why did you come directly to me? It wasn't to blackmail me, was it?

Ugly Vampire: Don't overstep yourself, Arturo. You know as well as I do that something's

going on in your building. You know better than I do. You're the one doing it.

Arturo: More insinuations! My effluvious friend, I invite you to take a look around the Greenwich Village Gate. I cordially invite you. I'm afraid all you'll find is a construction site, with its attendant comings and goings, accidents and petty worker's comp lawsuit threats. Unless you're a daytime-TV lawyer, you'll be sorely disappointed, I'm proud to say.

Ugly Vampire: I'm going to take you up on that.

Arturo: I beg your pardon?

Ugly Vampire: You invited me. I'm going to crawl all across that site. I'm going to find that you're up to something or I'm going to find something that even you don't know about.

Arturo: Be my guest! Pick through it like you would the filthy rags of your own haven. If it means the clearance of my good name from the slightest hint of suspicion, I'll even roll out the red carpet for you. I ask, of course, that you keep out of sight, but aside from that, I'd be interested in seeing what sorts of secrets you can turn up. By all means, report them to me. I can't say that I have much faith in your skills as an intelligence-gatherer right now, but perhaps you can convince me otherwise with a little due diligence.

Ugly Vampire: I'll play your game, Arturo. Give me six weeks. If I find nothing — nothing from you or nothing that you can use — I'll offer you a boon by way of apology, and all I ask is that you remain silent about it.

Arturo: Of course. And if you find something of interest?

Ugly Vampire: Then I bring it directly to you and you owe me a favor that we'll decide later.

Arturo: An excellent challenge. I accept. I'm half-tempted to throw distractions in your way.

Ugly Vampire: Do what you want — I can tell a red herring from the real thing. I got it out of you, didn't I?

Arturo: I think we both took away something this evening. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to talk to Mr. Al-Asmai about his interests in the building.

Ugly Vampire: Of course. We'll speak again.



Arturo: Bruce? Something's come up.

Rifkind: Yes, sir?

Arturo: One of my fellows is... onto me.

Rifkind: What would you have me do, sir?

Arturo: Well, I don't think you'll see her about, but if you do, just know that she has a sort of implied permission to be there. On the site, that is.

Rifkind: I'm not sure I understand you, sir. Do you mean she'll be coming by to review the site?

Arturo: In so many words. She'll probably come by to do a bit of forgivable spying. Somehow she caught wind of the accident Mr. Cabrera had and tried to call me on it. I managed to convince her that everything was legitimate in hopes of talking her down. It won't do to have others of my kind knowing that the Gateway's going to be the subject of... scrutiny. Right now it's just a construction accident, but it'll sorely hurt the property value if there are crimes associated with the project.

Rifkind: Oh, I know that sir, but it's all been handled on my end. Brightways has cancelled the last check issued in Mr. Cabrera's name, because he and his family weren't legal citizens. In fact, there's only been one complication.

Arturo: What's that? The medical examiner?

Rifkind: No, that's been handled as well. Your associate Mr. Vanderweyden had that cleaned up when I came into work this evening, and I have a copy of the ME's report that's going to be filed.

Arturo: And what happened to that first ME's findings?

Rifkind: Mr. Vanderweyden has "lost" them.

Arturo: That's relieving. So what is our problem, then?

Rifkind: Well, sir, it turns out that Mr. Cabrera wasn't Puerto Rican after all, but rather Cuban.

Arturo: Why is that a problem?

Rifkind: Well, the rest of the staff had been informed that we'd be sending a wreath to Puerto Rico to Mr. Cabrera's family.

Arturo: Oh, don't mind that. No one will care. No one will even remember. Freudian slip or something. Be mindful of it in the future, but don't trip over yourself to correct it now.

Rifkind: Understood, sir. And, to bring this back to your original concern, how am I to recognize your permitted guest?

Arturo: Oh, you'll know her on the off chance that you see her, which you probably won't. She's got a face like an Irishman's soul: ugly as sin.

Rifkind: And you're trusting her to be here at her discretion, sir?

Arturo: Of course not, Rifkind. You know better than to think I trust any of these Licks. You shouldn't even trust me outside of the fact that I find you useful. Don't

talk to her. Don't deal with her. Don't do anything with her. If she starts hassling you for whatever reason tell me immediately.

Rifkind: Yes, sir. I'll be aware.

Arturo: You do that. Also, if you do see her, tell me what she's up to. If this is a ruse to embarrass me or the company I'll need to know immediately.

MARCH 21

Rifkind: Miss Carney? I'm Bruce Rifkind. You asked me to meet you for lunch concerning a bit of business for mutual friends of ours.

Carney: Well! It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rifkind—

Rifkind: Call me Bruce.

Carney: All right, Bruce. Please call me Rebecca. I have a folder here... here it is... that includes a copy of a medical examiner's report for a Mr. Rosendo Cabrera... and a second report—

Rifkind: Please... let's keep this down a bit.

Carney: Ah, yes. My error. Anyway, here's the folder.

Rifkind: You said it's a copy. Has the original been destroyed?

Carney: To the best of our knowledge. I ran this copy at the request of an assistant DA. I haven't seen any other requests for it, however, and I'm the assistant to the ADA handling the case.

Rifkind: There haven't been any insurance companies stepping up to claim the case?

Carney [laughing]: Insurance companies? Wanting to turn up claims? Insurance companies don't want any claim to surface that doesn't have to, Bruce.

Rifkind: Oh, I know that Rebecca. I was just wondering if there's been any other interest in this particular case.

Carney: There hasn't. That first ME's report maybe made it as far as the morgue, and even then it would have been superseded by the more recent one. That's actually probably where it disappeared. Whoever was in charge of keeping the body in the drawer would have thrown it away when the new report came down.

Rifkind: Then where did you get a copy of it?

Carney: Public records. It's the only copy, as I said. As it stands, the new report would be the one in circulation or on file at the department.

Rifkind: Then it occurs to me that this is profoundly illegal.

Carney: Very much so. But every now and then, I accidentally drop a file on the way to the shredder. By the time I notice that I've dropped it... well, I'm sure one of my colleagues found it in the hall and noticed that it was marked for document destruction. It must have made it to the shredder eventually.

[Long silence]

Rifkind: Why do you do this, Rebecca?

Carney: I'm sure I do it for the same reasons you do, Bruce. Everybody in New York is lonely until they find the right person. I've found mine. I think you've found yours, too.

Rifkind: Hm. I hope you're right. Because, sometimes, I don't think I am.

MARCH 22

Short and sweet, Arturo. It's taken me only two weeks to dig up the bats in your belfry, if you'll pardon the expression. Well, never mind... I don't really care if you do or not.

As it turns out, you owe me a favor. Let's discuss terms and I'll give you the details. I'm making a copy of this tape and backing it up in a few other media, so you can have the gist of the situation right now. One of your employees is living in your building. I have his name and parts of his file here with me, but you already have access to those. It turns out that he lost his apartment a few days ago and has been staying at the construction site ever since. I'm surprised you haven't run across him yet, but it's true he has been taking extra precautions with you. What's even more audacious is that he's been keeping a journal. It's

apparently some part of a legal arrangement he's made to keep himself out of jail. I've read parts of it. He doesn't like you.

I didn't know you were such a bleeding heart, Arturo. I'm quite impressed that you go out of your way to give the downtrodden a second chance. Not unlike our own relationship, I suppose.

Smell that? Sarcasm! Still, I've been good to you and I hope you'll be good to me.

I don't think this individual poses any threat to you. He's too wrapped up in his own situation (being effectively homeless and all that) and has some special circumstances that I'll share when we meet to discuss the terms of our agreement. Still, I would keep an eye or ear open on those nights that you "work late," as you suggested in our last conversation. You never know when someone might be looking.

MARCH 23

Qadir—

I have an excellent way for us to settle the debt you owe me, and if you play your hand wisely, you'll barely have to lift a finger.

I have had the recent misfortune of coming to contact with one of the loathsome sewer monsters that prowl this domain. Said wretch entered into an agreement with me to do a bit of investigation, but now seeks to hold the information she gleaned over me. I'm sure I don't need a warning about who to trust and who not to, but this gamble has been one that I've lost.

I don't respond well to threats, and that's precisely what this execrable creature poses. While this might fall outside your duties to our community, I'm hoping that you have a connection to one of the dispensers of our kind, preferably one appointed by the prince.

Please don't put this into motion immediately, other than finding a suitable fellow who might undertake the work. This would-be blackmailer can still serve a purpose so long as I convince her that I am in her debt and am willing to assume more.

If this is amenable to you, please let me know and we'll set a plan in motion.

JA

"Angel"

I call you that because I am no stranger to sarcasm, myself. You seem to have styled yourself as a reluctant but wise savior, and I'll indulge you with the benefit of the doubt. I'm leaving you this note in my own office, trusting that your inherent sense of inquisitiveness will lead you to it.

So you've found an unwelcome guest in the building. I applaud your ability. You have proven me both wrong and overconfident. I will arrange to have this interloper terminated within a week.

Now we enter into a state of negotiation, however. What is this information worth to you? I have a proposal. You mention a legal situation with this employee. That suggests trouble with the law that temporary employees all too often find themselves facing. In payment for your exposure of this oversight, and your agreed silence of its testament, I offer you the interloper's life itself. I will handle the matter of his disappearance, and I will have my man make a statement that this individual left the company one night, never to return again. No suspicion will fall on you from either our own community nor from the mortal authorities.

I am sure this seems callous to you, but allow me to explain my position. If this person has become a squatter in the building, he has already noticed how my schedule and habits differ from those of other people around the site, and it is only a matter of time before my true nature becomes apparent to him. Were I to have him fired, it would only arouse his suspicion, and even if it didn't, it would give him enough free time to conduct some elective investigation of his own. I am not willing to risk that.

What you do with him is up to you — feed from him, make him your servant or even petition the powers that be for permission to turn him into one of your own progeny. It doesn't matter to me. I will make him vanish from the world's sight and handle all the delicate logistics so that you need not concern yourself with them.

You may reach me again at your leisure. I would give you a telephone number, but your own ingenuity at locating me impresses me. Find me again.

JA

MARCH 25

Arturo,

I was pleased as punch to receive your invitation to do your dirty work, which I must regretfully decline. You've got to clean up your own backyard. I'm just here to tell you you've got the problem to begin with. At this point, the guy's been in your office, and I don't mean the one in the trailer.

So no deal. You still owe me.

Here's what I propose in return. Feel free to offer your thoughts, you smooth-talker, you. I've got a list of four, and you can drop any single one you want.

You allow me feeding rights in your domain.

You allow me to use your Greenwich Village Gate for an emergency haven. I will settle for use of one of the towers instead of both, and I won't bring undue heat there. I'll just use it when I need to get away from my other havens for a while.

I want any dirt you have on a certain child of the night who we'll discuss once you agree to this tenet. It's no big deal — not a prince or anything like that.

I want a birthday cake left for me on the first night of every month at a location that I'll specify three nights before it comes due. Not that I really care about birthdays, but I want to know just how far you're willing to go to save this precious reputation of yours.

Call me!

Oh, no, wait. Don't do that. Just leave me another note like you did last time.

"Angel" of the Mornin'

MARCH 26

Arturo: There's someone we need to fire.

Rifkind: Again? The office is looking down on us a little strangely, sir.

Arturo: No, we're completely in the clear on this one. It's someone who's lost his apartment due to a personal situation and he's taken up residence at the site. I suspect drugs or contraband, but I know it's illegal. I want you to dig up what it is he's doing and then fire him for it. I'll be there to help you, of course. Brightways doesn't make it a policy to hire trespassing addicts, does it, Bruce?

Rifkind: No, sir. I'm on it. You say he's living in the building?

Arturo: That's right. My tower, I believe. He's probably on one of the higher floors so no one will come across him randomly. And he's probably living pretty lightly, out of a suitcase or some such.

Qadir—

I'm pleased we could come to an agreement.

It's time to put the plan in motion. My benefactor has become downright irascible in her demands and it's no longer prudent for me to acquiesce to her demands. The sooner she meets her end, the better. I've given you a description and hopefully that will be enough for you or whoever it is who does the deed to know whom I'm talking about.

DA

MARCH 28

Rifkind: Well, that was certainly strange.

Arturo: Yes. Yes, it was. What were your impressions, Bruce? What about him seemed a little off.

Rifkind: That's a good choice of words, sir. It was only a little off, but it was that little bit that made the difference. We've fired people before, of course, but they're usually... I don't know... a bit more animated than that. You would think that when faced with homelessness and unemployment you'd have a bit more of an earnest reaction.

Arturo: Ah, that's my Rifkind. Always worried about the bottom line. You don't have any pangs of guilt about taking away a desperate man's last hope of salvation? Turning him out onto the street with no other alternatives? He was obviously in no condition to find new work....

Rifkind: It was him or you, sir. No contest there.

Arturo: Of course. That's why I keep you, Bruce. You're a man who does what needs to be done.

Rifkind: Oh, I'm not completely unfazed by it, sir. It never feels good to kick a man while he's down.

Arturo: But you recognize the necessity of it when it needs to happen.

Rifkind: Absolutely. Did you see the way he stared at us? It was the most curious calm I've ever seen.

Arturo: Agreed. Maybe there's something to be said for grim resolve.

Rifkind: To be honest, sir, I didn't expect it from this one. The night after Mr. Cabrera died, he couldn't even finish his shift, he was so overcome with... well, whatever. Compassion, I guess. Or sorrow. He didn't seem like one for it tonight, but he's always seemed kind of lonely and isolated, and largely uncomfortable with it.

Rifkind: How is he getting up there? Wouldn't someone see the construction lift operating?

Arturo: He's either doing it right at the end of his shifts or he's using the stairs and relying on a uniform to allow him access to the site. That reminds me, we'll probably need to hire a different security firm for the site. The one we have currently seems to think I subsidize its naptimes.

Rifkind: I'm on it, sir. Was there anything else you needed from Mr. Vanderweyden?

Arturo: Quite clever, Bruce, but I don't think we'll need to employ our own ME just yet. Give this a night or two for you to check out the building and find adequate evidence that we've got our man. I'll be out of touch for the rest of tonight and tomorrow night, but I'll be back on Wednesday to resolve this issue in the staff room.

Rifkind: Consider it done, sir.

Arturo: My good Mr. Rifkind, you're becoming quite the capital judge of character! I had seen him on his shifts before and he seemed merely indolent to me. A dreamer. A slacker. But you insist there was more to him?

Rifkind: I think so, sir. Nothing threatening, of course, or this would have been addressed long ago, but a sort of... I don't know. Untapped potential. Like he once had something but it had been beaten out of him.

Arturo: Oh, stop this before it becomes maudlin. He was a vagrant. You're romanticizing.

Rifkind: Would you say that his quietness was defiant?

Arturo: I've overestimated you, Rifkind. Our man's silence was emplaced by fear. I could smell it in his blood. Our kind can do that. We can see and smell and taste the subtle inflections of the soul. I have to admit, I've never used the ability before when terminating people, but something made me do it this time. I did sense something uncommon about him, but I can't put my finger on what. An unusual resolve, perhaps, but nothing wholly out of the ordinary. It might have even been resentment, not at being fired, but at us finding out about his secret. Oh, and Rifkind?

Rifkind: Sir?

Arturo: Did we ever find out what his legal trouble was?

Rifkind: Ah. Yes, indeed. Here's his file. Suspended sentence with probation for several counts of larceny.

Arturo: A real winner! See, Bruce. In spite of ourselves, we sometimes do the right thing.

Rifkind: Oh, absolutely, sir.

MARCH 29

Ugly Vampire: Are you trying to blow me off? That would be a mistake.

Arturo: What? Oh, "Angel," you'd given me quite a start. You do know this is not only private property, but a secure worksite, don't you?

Ugly Vampire: Don't fuck with me. You gave me your own permission to be here. I'm just dropping by to make sure the terms of our agreement aren't violated.

Arturo: I'm sorry?

Ugly Vampire: The deal we had. I found the skeleton in your closet and in return for keeping quiet, you've got to pay me. It was all in the note I left you.

Arturo: Ah, yes, the note. I did review it.
(Long pause)

Ugly Vampire: Yes? Well? You reviewed it and what?

Arturo: You're new to all this, aren't you?

Ugly Vampire: What do you mean?

Arturo: You haven't been playing our game for long, I mean. The rules of engagement among us are very different from those of... people.

Ugly Vampire: Oh, Christ. What the hell are you talking about?

Arturo: Arrangements and agreements like these don't happen overnight. They happen over months. Years even. Yes, you've provided a service for me, and a very timely and valuable one, but the boon you've earned doesn't immediately come to fruition. It takes time to mature.

Ugly Vampire: Oh, no you don't. How do I know that you'll ever honor the debt? You can't expect me just to sit back and hope that one night out of the kindness of your heart — excuse my gagging, but it's a reflex — you'll start to honor your debt. You pretty ones are all alike, thinking that even after your death the world still owes you gratitude.

Arturo: That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying that it helps keep us hidden, and surely you recognize the value of that. We must move slowly. Subtly. If our affairs were conducted at the speed of those of the mortal world, why, we'd be as visible to mortals as they are to each other. Our system of favors and boons builds gradually, slowly over the years. We move with such deliberate pacing that the rest of the world ignores us in its hurry to make things better for itself.

Ugly Vampire: Don't fuck with my head.

Arturo: I'm not doing that at all. Surely you understand that, being ageless, we can afford the time to enact these slow movements? That our masquerade protects us from the rash actions of our fellows as much as it does from the ire of the mortal world?

Ugly Vampire: Screw all that. You owe me.

Arturo: And I intend to pay, so long as you observe the terms of the agreement as well. Have you told anyone of our arrangement?

Ugly Vampire: I'm about to. I'm giving you one more chance by coming here tonight. If I don't leave here satisfied, your name's not worth shit in this town.

Arturo: As much as I doubt a single campaign against me by one such as yourself would bring me so low, I do intend to honor our agreement. And you intend to uphold it as well, correct?

Ugly Vampire: Right. For now.

Arturo: Come on, now, "Angel." If you're suggesting blackmail, I strongly encourage you to consider the nature of the information you're so eager to hold over me. It's nothing grave. It's a simple laxity of security. Arguably, without your information, the only one who'd be in a position to be hurt was me, since this person has made his home in my domain. And even that has changed, since he's been released from his duties and driven from the property.

Ugly Vampire: That's not all, though. I did a little checking on that accident you had a while back. It turns out that two different Medical Examiner's reports were filed, but only one is available through the records department.

Arturo: I don't understand how that implicates me. I'm not even sure what you're saying.

Ugly Vampire: I told you not to fuck with my head. You covered it up. You had someone write a second report.

Arturo: I assure you that I did no such thing. My influence is in building, development and real estate. As flattered as I am by your estimation of the length to which my powers reach, I don't have the clout to put something like that in motion. Perhaps I could bribe a building inspector or procure a contract with the city for construction, but the medical examiner's office is entirely out of my bailiwick.

Ugly Vampire: Uh-huh. So it's a coincidence that a guy dies in your building, you fire a half-dozen employees, and complications come up about whether or not your report on the dead guy is bogus? That's bullshit and you know it. Coincidence doesn't work like that.

Arturo: I'm not suggesting that there isn't a cover-up. I'm just saying that it's not mine. I can think of several companies, agencies or individuals who would want the matter swept under the rug, and who have a lot more influence over civic affairs than I do. I'm always the first to suspect the insurance companies. They'd go a little out of their way to absolve themselves of responsibility so they

don't have to go a lot out of their way to settle a claim. Mr. Cabrera's tragedy is plainly a wrongful-death suit waiting to happen.

The union has a stake in keeping it silenced as well. If members start to think that it's not protecting them, it collapses as fewer and fewer people support it.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that organized crime all but runs construction in New York. Check my invoices to see what I pay for concrete and certified plumbing if you don't believe me. Which opens an entirely new avenue of possibilities: If this wasn't a dispute with organized crime itself, it may well lead back to the unions through them.

It might be a doctor protecting himself from malpractice. It might be the state or city protecting itself from negligence lawsuits. It might even be the architecture firm that's subcontracted me, wanting to keep its insurance rates from rising, or even to make a quiet show to the unions that it won't be strong-armed by threats of a walkout.

In short, until you have evidence to implicate me, I'm probably your least likely candidate for a cover-up.

Ugly Vampire: This is ridiculous.

Arturo: Not at all. I appreciate what you've done for me and I'm going to reward you with what you deserve. But it takes time. There are even several things on your list that are contingent upon me getting this building... well, *built*, and if you stand in my way, I can't pay you. I can't honor the debt if you won't let me.

Ugly Vampire: Oh, no you don't. None of those require that the building is complete. I could easily make a temporary haven in a building that's not

finished, and this neighborhood has enough kine to be a valuable hunting ground, whether I can drop off my dry cleaning on your ground floor or not. This is your neighborhood, Arturo. I've done my part for you. Now you need to do your part for me.

Arturo: Trust doesn't come easily to you, I see. You will learn, I assure you. I'm not much older than you — and that's assuming I *am* older than you. But I am more worldly, at least within the realm of the favor-exchange that constitutes our society.

Ugly Vampire: I don't care what your argument is. You owe me. Pay me. Pay me now.

Arturo: That's plainly not possible. We're not talking about tangible rewards. We're talking about courtesies and indulgences. I can't just hand these things over to you — they're considerations that we'll both have to acclimate to.

Ugly Vampire: Now you're just talking in circles. Fuck this. I'm taking this to the others.

Arturo: Will you at least do me a favor? Cool off for a while. I can understand being frustrated right now. You want this done and over with, the assets yours to command right now. *Believe me*, I understand that. I'm already three months behind schedule on having this building finished. I don't want to extend our debt any longer than you do. But calm down, think about what I've said and let's continue this discussion soon. If you want, I'll even ask someone — someone neutral, before you suspect me of anything else — to moderate the negotiation for us. Take some time to mull it over, think about the nature of your requests and we'll continue this discussion.

Ugly Vampire: Fuck it. Fine. You have a week. I'll be back a week tonight and we'll make things final. *Final*.

Arturo: Absolutely.

APRIL 2

Thomas:

What you have asked for is done. I even had the assassin collect the ashes, should you desire them as some sort of statement of finality.

Our debt is absolved.

Qadir

APRIL 12

Hellene

I write this to you as much as a warning as a confessional. I have tried to keep my hands clean for as long as I could. You know the perils of our predatory state, yet unless one is in the violent throes of frenzy, remorse comes almost as quickly on the heels of a kill as the heady rush of taking vitae abates. Yet kill we must — it is in our nature, and to deny the inevitable thrust of one's deathless urge is to lose oneself entirely to the monster that threatens to overtake us nightly.

I have pretended, in the past, that such things didn't matter. I justified killings and told myself that one more mortal culled from the herd didn't matter. You and I both know that it's not true, that every life we take is another on the list of injustices that started with our own induction into the world of night. Are we evil for not destroying ourselves outright? For permitting ourselves to continue on as we do, rising each night to steal innocent blood? Are we somehow right when we kill our own kind, sparing untold others from the selfishness we bring to the world and repay only in further misery? I am guilty for the death of others of our kind, it is true, but I tell myself that it is permissible, that I save someone else down the road. I distanced myself from each of those kills with a cold detachment that I cannot feel when I take the life of a vital, still mortal, living being. With regard to mortals, I have killed only six times in my years.

Listen to me: I have killed only six mortals! I have extinguished only six mortal lives. I have touched untold others. We are evil, Hellene, philosophers among us to be disregarded. I have heard ethicists liken us to wolves and question whether the wolf commits evil when it brings down a deer to sate its hunger.

We are not wolves. We are predators, true, but we are parasites foremost, and we have that which a wolf does not. We have souls, I believe, Hellene. A wolf does not choose to kill, a wolf merely does what God put it on this Earth to do. Is it strange to hear me talk of God? It comes awkwardly to me, too. I have spent the last several months observing no God other than my own desires, and the deity that money has become in this modern world. I have killed twice in these past few months, most recently tonight and prior to that for the sole purpose of eliminating a threat to my vanity.

You think I am being florid, no doubt. You have come to terms with your own God, isolated yourself from those who would refuse you. I know the practicality of it. We both surround ourselves with those so sick, deluded or actively fooled into believing that by giving themselves to us, they somehow justify themselves to the rest of the world. Each draught of blood we take from them is a draught given willingly, and one that we won't have to take by force from those who don't even know we exist. We are debased, tricking others into believing that or cultivating those who would do it without such subterfuge. And as much as we fool them, we fool ourselves into thinking that makes it acceptable.

I killed a man tonight. He was a pathetic man, drowning in his own filth. He hid here in my office, waiting to kill me if this manic scrawl I read in the notebook he left behind is true. It has been uncomfortable reading, to be sure. Somehow, he managed to ascertain what I was, and at one point even mentioned that my entire aspect had changed. Naturally, when I read this I went to the mirror only to find that I hadn't changed a bit. There was something strange about this man, though. I knew when I saw him that he wasn't a threat, so enfeebled was he by his condition. A drug addict, he hid in a closet here in the office, with bits of his dirty paraphernalia scattered around him and the most horrid scent you would ever hope to encounter — vinegar, sweat and urine. I have had Rifkind remove him and call the police. I didn't take any of his blood, as I am sure it's polluted by whatever hellish concoction he had put into his system.

He would have destroyed himself eventually, but his intent was to destroy me.

I smelled him from a veritable mile away and heard his furtive rustling the moment I entered my office. I thought it was rats (I don't know why — this building doesn't have rats). By the time I determined the hidden menace was in the closet, I even overheard him talking to himself. I opened the door and there he was, a pile of himself, wearily waving a broken broomstick at me. He was oddly serene in his fever. Almost innocent in a way. Then I realized I knew him.

I had known about a former employee of mine squatting in the building for some time. I had him fired, not only because of the potential threat he posed with the possibility of discovering some unsavory habit of mine, but also because he had gone

through a legal problem. This was the man. The drugs were his legal problem and somewhere amid the haze of it all he had learned what I was. Dim recollection crossed his eyes when I opened the door. I read his soul and it shocked me, as it glowed with a golden color I had never seen before. It was profoundly bright for such a person so close to death, and I don't speak figuratively here. If I hadn't broken his neck, he would have been dead by sunrise, and yet this gold nimbus still floated around him. I've never seen a saint, but I imagine the effect must be much the same.

That's when I killed him. I didn't give him a chance to strike me down. I kicked the broomstick out of his hand, pulled him to his feet and snarled. His eyes opened wide but then narrowed to hateful slits. It was like looking into the personified anger of everyone I had ever taken something from, crossed or hurt. He knew what I was and even in the depths of his own disintegration he wanted to end me.

I suppose I should have let him, and perhaps I would have on a more sorrowful night. Tonight, though, as I pulled him up and looked into his righteous hate, the animal inside overwhelmed me. Flush with the power I knew I had over him, I shook him — once, hard — and it was over. It was all over so quickly, this irreversible act, I didn't even take anything from it. No vitae. No thrill at thwarting a rival. I simply killed a man who would have killed me if he could. But wouldn't they all kill us if they could? If they knew we existed?

Afterward, I felt empty but I knew that something had gone. Something in me had left as this dead junkie left the mortal coil. I wonder if he took it with him when he left as a final (and, I suppose, sole) gesture of defiance. He put an end to his misery and tried to make the world a better place for it. He failed, but he tried. When I try... anything. When I try anything, the only thing that's ever better is my own situation. It's the same with us all. Until we're stopped once and for all, we will do it again and again and again.

Even in this, facing something I didn't know, all I can take from the experience is a selfish revelation. We are the scourge of the world.

IA





CHAPTER 5:

A NEST OF VIPERS

Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death.

— Mark 13:12

LOG ENTRY 9

Filed my latest report on Bill. Left out details about his meetings with Walker, Vazquez and the others. I also reported only what I saw at the abandoned house: a B&E that may or may not have netted anything. The disturbing thing about the house is that someone else had been there. The place had been cleaned up. The front door had been fixed and two of the back windows were no longer boarded up.

I also think I may have been followed on the drive back. I tried not to be paranoid, but I pulled a few of my old tricks and lost the tail, all the same. If there even was one. Hell, it may have just been a curious cop. It's completely possible that the gunshots were reported to whoever takes care of the place, they came by to check up on things, saw that someone had been inside and gave the police a holler. Still, I didn't recognize the vehicle or the plates.

Both the report on Bill and the stuff on the house went into the mail this evening. That should keep my

clients happy for a while, and free me up to take care of the real matter at hand. Still, I hate how the two are beginning to cross over. There's just way too much coincidence in Bill knocking off a rot in some house, and now some underhanded political bastards want info on both the house and Bill. As long as I'm on the case, I dictate what they learn, but they have to be getting information from somewhere else. Things just don't add up otherwise.

This reminds me a bit too much of a story I heard while watching one of us in Dallas. There was one guy, a real shit kicker who was hot to take down a blood-sucker he had run into. The guy tried to ambush the thing while it was at an art show of all places. He wound up in jail for assault, but the charges got dropped because the victim never came forward to make a statement. It seems like a lot of people knew who this leech was, but no one really knew much about him. The cops got a name, and a few other basic pieces of info on the monster, but couldn't track him down for

testimony or anything like that. Soon enough, the guy's back on the street.

Then it all starts to fall apart.

His electricity and phone get cut off. Turns out that according to both companies' computers, the guy hasn't paid a bill in a year. A random police search at school turns up enough dope in his kid's locker to send the entire school into orbit. The kid gets sent to juvie. The guy's out at all hours, so when his wife gets weird phone calls from women asking about her husband, she puts two and two together and divorces him.

The guy just gave up. He tossed all his crap into his truck and headed out of town. Last I heard, the leech was still around, like nothing ever happened, and no one else there is crazy enough to touch him.

This guy Vazquez is looking like one of those things. He's gotta have connections. He's like a wolf making friends with sheep in the flock. All he's got to tell them is, "Hey, I won't touch you guys so long as you don't say squat when I eat those guys over there." Maybe the government really is working with these things. Maybe the people in power are trading away us working class schmucks to hold onto power and save their own skins.

This group, though, they think they've hit gold. They met tonight and sounded pretty damn proud of themselves. Walker's talking about moving among the monsters to pick out the ones that prey on people. You'd think from the way he acts now that he's an old hand at this. I'm still kicking myself for missing how he got that gun. Even Ellen seems to be on more of an emotional even keel. These guys have tasted blood and want more. They built the things up to be these great mysteries, and now Vazquez is just lining critters up and letting these guys knock 'em down.

Bill is the only one showing any sense. If he had more guts he'd kick the other three into shape and remind them that two weeks ago they were all ready to piss their pants. He's been trying to get them to think of why Vazquez is helping them. It just doesn't add up and Bill sees it. The others are far too wrapped up in their "victory" to realize what's going on.

They're set to meet Vazquez again on the 31st and are champing at the bit to take on a new target. Vazquez has them right where he wants them. They trust the guy, which is a death wish. There's just too much we don't know about the things to trust any of them.

LOG ENTRY 10

I don't know what's going on, and it scares me. Last night, the house where Bill and the others fought that thing went up in flames. Burned completely to the ground. I cased the neighborhood a

little, asking some questions. It turns out that a few of the locals heard cars roaring down the street at around two in the morning and, get this, automatic weapons fire. Then the house went up in smoke. And here's the kicker: All this, and nothing in the local news. The locals are freaked out, but I saw patrol cars in the area. My contacts on the force tell me extra shifts will cover the area for a while till things calm down. I guess that as long as the cops seem to be taking it seriously, no one wants the news sending property values down.

On a complete aside, Walker has been busy lately. It looks like he's stocking up on guns and ammo as if that's become his answer to the world's monster problem.

LOG ENTRY 11

Here's the transcript of their first meeting with Vazquez since they went to that house. Notes, as usual, at the end.

Bill: Good evening.

Vazquez: That's a sight more polite than I'm used to. I've done some checking. Looks like you've been pretty busy.

Ellen: You could say that.

Vazquez: Catch that shiner falling down the stairs? Walk into a wall?

Ellen: A door.

Vazquez: What did you do with the remains?

Walker: What's that matter?

Vazquez: What do you mean, "What's that matter"? You drop off a body on the side of the road and that creates a situation!

Bill: We burned it.

Johnny: You're lucky we did that much. After what that thing did... Jesus, were you trying to get us killed? You never warned us.

Vazquez: What are you talking about?

Johnny: It did something. That or someone else was there. No one else says they saw it, but I sure did.

Walker: Oh, Jesus.

Johnny: I'm not making this up! It was like the shadows came alive! They grabbed me.

Walker: Please, you probably just—

Vazquez: Tell me what happened. What do you mean the shadows came alive?

Ellen: We checked the first two floors, then went down to the basement. We found it down there. That was around dusk. We figured that whatever happened, we'd want to be able to get out of there when it was dark, to avoid being seen.

Bill: It would do none of us any good to be spotted in the area if things went badly.



Ellen: We found it crashed out in the basement and I tried to drive a stake through its chest. It was... hard to do. It woke up and all hell broke loose.

Vazquez: You tried to stab it with a piece of wood? You've seen too many movies.

Johnny: That's when the stuff with the darkness happened. I was standing behind everyone. It felt like I was stuck in mud. I couldn't hear or see anything.

Vazquez: So what happened next?

Ellen: Walker shot the thing. A lot.

Walker: You were right about bullets not doing shit. At least small-caliber ones. I emptied a whole clip into it and it kept coming, but I think something bigger would have—

Ellen: It tried to grab me, but I... finished it.

Vazquez: What? How?

Ellen: I don't know how to say it. There was some loose pipe laying around down there. I used one of them. [Silence.]

Vazquez: Well, maybe the bullets did slow him down. They might not have killed him, but they probably hurt him.

Johnny: So what the hell was up with the shadows?

Vazquez: Some of us can do some... things. Can control nature. It's nothing more than walking or talking or taking a dump to them.

Walker: What about you?

Vazquez: I can't pull that crap. Most of us can't. Hell, I thought it was all bullshit.

Bill: So you don't know exactly what you sent us into... or what we're into now?

Vazquez: Maybe "Rock and Roll" here panicked. Maybe not. If not, you guys have stumbled onto something really big.

Ellen: What are you talking about?

Vazquez: I can't say much. I could be wrong, but I've heard stories about what Johnny's talking about. You guys may have taken down a real badass. I had no idea it could've been him, which tells you how little we knew about this guy, about how tough it was to get a handle on him. I need to find out.

I may need your help again. If you can take him down you have to be good. Damn good. And if that was who I think it was, more are headed this way.

End Transcript

I don't know what to make of this. My first reaction is that this guy is blowing sunshine up their asses. Them being "good." Give me a break. This guy is setting them up for something. He's either using them to do his dirty work or he's got some other plan. Maybe they're a diversion. Maybe he's using them to call out someone else. There's so much going on here that I just can't get

a handle on it all. It's not like I can just tail Vazquez. Or maybe I can.

No, that's not an option. I'm set up to keep tabs on these guys and I'm going to stick with it. No use in risking my neck, too.

The four of them are eating all this shit up. I want to go down the hall and beat some sense into them, but the way they're acting does make a fucked up kind of sense. They used to be terrified. Now they're finally doing something. They couldn't agree about anything before. Then Vasquez sits them down, points them in the right direction and they're off. The nights don't seem as terrifying. They think they can handle themselves. Hell, even Ellen has done a 180.

For their sake, I hope they're right.

LOG ENTRY 12

They met with Vazquez again tonight.

Vazquez: I've talked to my people.

Bill: Your people? So there are others like you here? You said before that you were alone.

Vazquez: Phones. We use them. This is the 21st century, right? I thought we were past all that suspicion.

Bill: Look at it from our point of view. You hold all the cards. Now, what's going on and what do we have to do with it?

Vazquez: The one you killed was named Harrington. He was kind of a leader or a cult figure, I guess you could say. Some of our kind followed him. Most of us, hell, all of us except his boys hated him. Harrington recently got separated from his friends. Some people I know took a few of them out a few states over. Harrington fled here. From what I can tell, the rest of his gang is heading here now to hook back up with him. They don't know you took him out.

Ellen: How do you know all this? You sound pretty organized.

Vazquez: We are, in a way. We watch out for each other and try to keep things under wraps.

Bill: Something is still bugging me. If you're like vampires or something, do you really drink blood and feed off people? Walker said he saw the one... Harrington, in the park....

Vazquez: Yes and no. We do drink blood, but it's not the only way we feed. We get nutrients... or vitamins from it. You know, like a cow eats grass or something and breaks it down in its stomach. The nutrients and stuff go through its blood. We just sort of sidestep all that. There's a lot of talk about how that's how we can be stronger or faster or tougher than most people.

Walker: So you do drink blood?

Vazquez: Didn't I just say that?

Walker: I mean you.

Vazquez: What, do I grab people and suck their blood, like in a movie? No. Most of us stick to animals or we get blood. Like transfusions. We also don't need it too often. Maybe once a week.

Ellen: You said most of you. Do a lot of you feed on people?

Walker: Maybe a lot of you do. How do we know were not just taking care of the competition for you?

Vazquez: Oh, come on. If you guys can do Harrington, you're a threat to me, too. Why would I risk coming here if I didn't need your help? The truth is only a few of us feed on humans. They see people as cattle or something. They think we should just do whatever the hell we feel like.

Bill: That's not very reassuring.

Vazquez: Like I said, they're the minority. The rest of us want to lay low. For centuries, there was always room for us out there. We didn't have to deal with people for long. If our paths crossed, we just moved on.

Johnny: Like Indians retreating from frontier settlers or something?

Vazquez: Yeah. But now there's people and buildings everywhere. There's not much more room left for us to go. We're stuck living closer to you than we're used to. We can make do, but not with nut jobs like Harrington running around.

Bill: So what do you do?

Vazquez: Take the United States. It's broken down into states. We kind of do the same thing, breaking down regions into smaller areas and assigning administrators to look after things. Near my home, we had a lot of trouble with Harrington and we had to deal with him. It looks like he and his crew may have decided that this city is easier pickings. There aren't enough of us around to keep watch over everything. So these guys try to set up shop somewhere. Maybe they attack people. If things get too hot, they head somewhere else.

Ellen: So you have some sort of police force?

Vazquez: Sort of. There aren't enough of us to go around. We kind of count on self-preservation kicking in and keeping everyone in line.

Bill: So why reveal yourself to us?

Vazquez: You saw Harrington at the park. The damage was already done. You had just enough information to be dangerous to all of my people. It was better that you knew the truth so you could tell the good guys from the bad guys.

Bill: So what's the long-term plan? Do you think you can hide forever?

Vazquez: We'll see.

Bill: There's got to be more to it all than that.

Vazquez: I don't know for sure, but there could be others like you we've contacted, to work with you and

help keep us hidden. We couldn't just come out altogether. Too many people wouldn't understand and would just try to kill us. We've seen mobs before.

End Transcript

They continued talking circles around each other for a while after this, but not to any point. I noticed that Vazquez never followed up on whether this gang of things was in town, and no one seemed alert enough to ask amid all the other bullshit. Maybe Bill noticed it, too, because the door had barely closed behind Vazquez before Bill was out after him. I thought maybe he wanted to talk in private, but my front camera showed Bill keeping his distance, like he was tailing Vazquez. It seems like these idiots are finally taking the bull by the horns rather than be fed its shit all the time.

Johnny ran his mouth about liberal crap after Vazquez left. He went on about oppressed minorities. He seemed sympathetic to Vazquez's song and dance, but then started talking about how they really didn't ever get a chance to hear Harrington's side. That he may have attacked that girl, but whatever Vazquez is up to may be even worse. That shook up Ellen, like she didn't want to think about anything but what "good" she had already done.

Johnny is like a fucking cancer. He might shake up the group and get them all killed if he keeps it up. Having someone around to question everything can help, but this guy just likes getting under everyone's skin.

Maybe some of these creatures can be good, just like people can be. But between us and them, things are like cats and mice. They have to feed off us. If the things could drink the blood of just anything, there's plenty of rats and dogs running any city. They could live off those and never have to cross paths with people.

Half the time, I want these idiots to pull something incredible out of their asses. The other half, I almost wish Vazquez would kick their asses so I wouldn't have to listen to their bullshit anymore.

LOG ENTRY 13

A summary of the past few days:

Walker is still stockpiling. Knowing him, he'll probably shoot his own foot off.

Ellen has been pretty quiet. I figure a teacher would try to find something to do over the summer, but it looks like she just spends all day with the TV on. Maybe the group's successes of late haven't encouraged her as much as I thought.

Johnny is up to his typical thing. I guess when you're that willing to believe the best about everything, the world seems like a pretty rosy place.

Bill is having a rough time of it. I passed along my last report on his activities yesterday. My contacts tell

me that despite his record and demeanor, the powers that be want to keep him where he is. There's also talk that he hasn't paid his dues yet. That's probably a good thing. His activities with the rest might go unnoticed as long as he's working on small potatoes state-level stuff. As soon as he guns for a national position, he'll open up his entire life to scrutiny. He could probably go for it anyway if he wants to ditch the party and try to ride his popularity, but he's not stupid enough to go for that.

Could there be a connection between his career and Vazquez? A lot of politics takes place under the table. I don't even know who I deliver my reports to. I just get calls, an address to drop pictures and reports, and in return I get an address for a money order or cash drop, or a back account number. There's no guarantee that the party on the other side is even human. Politics and business are already shadowy. The stakes are high enough that the occasional mysterious partner is tolerable — even expected. The things could get away with a lot behind the scenes.

That reminds me about the house. It was a little too convenient that "Harrington" just happened to be crashing there. How did it know that the owner wouldn't be home? Why did someone fork over the cash to keep the place looking good, unless he didn't want outsiders poking around? In a neighborhood like that, people notice if the grass grows a quarter inch too long. Why go to all that trouble to maintain the place unless you need it for something? Then a freaking gun battle breaks out, it burns to the ground and the cops and media overlook it all.

When cattle are herded toward the slaughterhouse, do any of them actually know what's going on?

For all I know, these things could be like a spider at the center of a web. They've picked out their turf and just have to pull the right strings to keep things going their way. If that's what's happening here, there's no reason to think Vazquez would work to halt Bill's rise if he had the power. If anything, you'd figure he'd want Bill to keep going and remain in the thing's pocket. Unless Vazquez wants him around for other reasons, ones that have nothing to do with politics. After all, if Vazquez wanted Bill as a political connection, he wouldn't set Bill up to go toe to toe with monsters.

Then again, if Vazquez had to liquidate Bill, a missing state rep draws a lot less attention than a missing candidate for the US Senate.

LOG ENTRY 14

Can't sleep tonight, so I'm surfing the net and trying to figure out where to take things. I want to track Vazquez down, but I don't have enough infor-

mation on him. All this reminds me of a story I picked up on the net and came across again tonight. I'm including it here to place it in context of what I've learned so far.

One of us in the Midwest was close on the trail of a rot. He and his buddies tracked the thing down to a record store. It looked like the thing spent its nights there (and I don't care what Vazquez may say, even if sunlight doesn't hurt these things, they sure as hell don't like it.) When these guys came back the next morning to check the place out, the clerk gave them a real hard time. He kicked them out after they'd been casing the place for only a few minutes. Later that day, when these guys were poking around the alley behind the store, the clerk came out and threatened them.

Apparently the kid looked wrong, as if he was bruised or tainted somehow. Later that afternoon, two more people came by to work at the store, both of whom looked similar. When the guys tried to break into the store, the shit really hit the fan. All three of the employees, despite being typical flabby music geeks, could move like the wind and punch like a ton of bricks. They must have had some sort of connection to the rot hiding there. They didn't call the cops or anything. They just attacked like animals.

Could allying with these things make people more than they should be? Does whatever it is that affects a leech spread like a disease? The things are obviously willing to work with people, and from the looks of it people are willing to work with them. Maybe a sort of relationship can develop between a leech and any it feeds off.

When these guys finally took down the monster, its lair was covered with vintage concert posters, stacks of albums and piles of memorabilia. Most interesting of all was this photo album with pictures of all kinds of musicians. Weirdest of all, the leech showed up in about half the pictures, usually posing with some artist. Bad taste in music is one thing, but this thing looked exactly the same in every picture, from the early '60s up until today. The times may have changed, but the guy was the same. Exactly the same. He didn't seem to have aged a day in decades.

Whatever these things are, they must have incredible life spans. Either they have a completely different concept of aging or they live a long time. If that's true, they might be far deeper into society than we could ever guess.

LOG ENTRY 15

Bill: I'm glad you were all able to make it here on such short notice. This entire ordeal has been trying on us all, and believe me I know how hard it is to put life on hold like this.

Walker: If what you have to say is as big a deal as you made out on the phone, it'll be worth it.

Bill: I tracked Vazquez into the city. That's why I ran out on you all. Somehow, I just knew I could do it. It was a spur of the moment decision.

Johnny: What happened to all that teamwork bullshit you were spewing?

Bill: I would've said something, but I didn't know if I would have another chance.

Johnny: No, I'm serious. Look, we're all putting our asses on the line here. What if you fucked up and got us all killed?

Ellen: Calm down....

Johnny: No! I won't calm down. None of you take me seriously. I almost get killed the night we deal with that Harrison guy and none of you even believe me. And now this. We can all just go off and make decisions that affect everybody.

Walker: Sit down and—

Johnny: Fuck you! I'm through with this.

Bill: Johnny....

[Door slam.]

Walker: Coward. He'll be back.

[Silence.]

Ellen: Forget him. You said you had something to tell us. What happened?

Bill: He drove a beat-up car. I didn't have much trouble following him, though I was worried he'd spot me. He stopped outside the park, the same one where we saw that first thing — Harrington. I drove by, parked a few blocks away and tried to follow him in.

Walker: What is that, their favorite stomping ground or something?

Bill: Maybe. I found him sitting on a bench. He just stayed there as if he was waiting for someone. I circled around and came up behind him through some trees. It's funny. All I could think of at the time was messing up my suit.

After a few minutes, someone came up and sat down next to him. I'd never seen him before, but he didn't seem right. Like he wasn't human. They talked. I didn't hear it all, but I heard enough.

They said something about a war or a fight. It seemed like there was a feud going on between the things in the city. The stranger asked questions, which Vazquez answered, but not before the stranger handed him a bundle. From the size and shape of it, I'd guess it was money.

Ellen: What if this guy was another contact like us?

Bill: I told you, the stranger was wrong. I look at you and I see a normal person. I looked at him and he wasn't right at all. He was one of them. And it sounds like there's more of them here, beyond even that gang

Vazquez told us about. Don't you see? That means he lied to us about himself and his kind. There are more of them. Maybe lots more. Who know what else he lied to us about? We have no idea how long he's been using us, or why.

Walker: Maybe Vazquez has some bosses checking up on him?

Ellen: Yeah. That would make sense. He talked about keeping track of each other and enforcing rules. Maybe that stuff was true.

Bill: There's more. This guy kept pressing Vazquez for information, especially about Harrington. I heard that name come up a few times. Vazquez said something about "outsiders" that he was tracking. He made some promises about some tool or weapon he might be able to hand over to one side or the other, for the right money. I think he was talking about us.

Ellen: But he said we were good. Maybe he wanted for us to meet with his friends. Maybe they paid him to train us.

Bill: God damn it, would you listen to me? These two were not friends. The other one accused Vazquez of playing both sides. That Vazquez would only be allowed to live as long as he kept providing information. That selling out to the other side would get him killed.

I think all he's been interested in is gathering information on us, not helping us. He started before he

even came here. Who knows how long he followed us. Got to know everything about us before playing his hand. He learns our secrets and then uses them to get us to do what he wants, without risking himself. He has us do his dirty work with his kind and he gets paid by both sides.

I know, because I saw him do it. After the stranger left, Vazquez stayed real still. For a moment it seemed like the dark was coming over him — like Johnny described — or he was becoming part of the dark. I can't explain it better than that. I was determined not to lose him, though, and he didn't disappear completely, even though other people in the park missed him altogether. He walked to the other end and sat down on another bench across from where a bum was sleeping under a tree. I hid next to a building nearby. A cop came by to move the bum along, but he didn't even turn to look at Vazquez.

Before long, someone else sat down. This one was louder. Not as discreet. He started yelling at Vazquez, asking him about who killed his people. He came right out and asked about the house we'd been to, and told him that it was totally useless now as a safehouse. It sounded like it had been burned down or something, but I haven't heard anything about that. Have any of you?

[Silence.]



Bill: The stranger demanded to know when Vazquez would have information about the people who killed his friend. He said something about a war, too, and how the attack was screwing up his plans. He said something about a woman named Camilla, I think. He seemed to be out to get her. I think she's some sort of important person.

Ellen: Oh my God. He's talking to Harrington's friends, the ones that are supposed to be heading here.

Walker: Sounds like they're already here.

Bill: They want revenge, and they're willing to pay to find out who killed Harrington. Vazquez is going to sell us out.

Walker: Sweet Jesus.

Ellen: That bastard has to pay. I want him dead.

Bill: I don't think this is ever going to be over. It's a lot bigger than we thought, but we need to stop him before he gets us all killed. We're supposed to see him again in two days. I say we get whatever we can out of him and kill him, just like we did to Harrington, or whatever he might really have been called. He walks in here and we jump him. With luck, he won't expect it. He's confident around us now. Maybe overconfident.

Walker: I've got guns. Big ones. I don't care how much noise we make.

End Transcript

LOG ENTRY 16

Things have been frighteningly quiet. Vazquez cancelled his meeting with the group. Coincidence or not, that's a bad sign.

LOG ENTRY 17

The bugs I planted Walker's apartment have been found, though not under the circumstances I ever expected. This is much worse. The cops discovered my electronics when they came to arrest Walker, supposedly on an anonymous tip. They found his guns, plus a few more that, judging from Walker's reaction, weren't part of the poor bastard's collection. The story takes a few more strange turns, based on what I learned from my contacts on the force. Walker's gun permits turned up bogus, with no records of them on file anywhere. But that's kid stuff compared to this: a few of the weapons, the ones that were planted, I think, are connected to a couple murders.

It gets worse. Johnny was hit by a car and killed while walking home from a bar. I read it in the paper today.

LOG ENTRY 18

I've been keeping track of Bill. To outward appearances, he's fine. Making the party rounds and sticking to

his normal routine. This all has to be making him shit his pants, though.

I haven't been able to find Ellen. She may have skipped town.

LOG ENTRY 19

According to my sources, Ellen is now listed as a missing person. Her sister reported it yesterday.

What the hell is going on?

LOG ENTRY 20

For the past two days, I've tailed Bill exclusively. My contact still wants information on him and I'm not willing to allow him to just disappear like Ellen did. At least now I don't have to bullshit the time Bill spent with Walker and the others. His days are devoted to political crap, and now his nights are spent at home alone.

The shit has hit the fan. Someone or something, Vazquez or whoever paid him the most targeted the poor bastards. These things must have friends on the inside. Walker's arrest just stinks. My contacts have turned up nothing about it, but I know it's not legit. Walker wasn't a killer.

Johnny may have been a victim of a DUI or the target of a hit. No one seems to know or care. There isn't much of an investigation under way, which doesn't jibe with Johnny being a student. There'd be a big stink over the death of a college kid. It's almost as if the police are doing just enough to keep his parents quiet.

I still have zip on Ellen.

Maybe these things like Vazquez are ticks. They're borrowed so deep into society that we just can't see them. If we want to dig them out, we're going to lose a lot of blood. Is the government in with these things? Maybe, but that doesn't explain Vazquez and his behavior, if Bill's story was accurate.

LOG ENTRY 21

Bill committed suicide today. He sat in his car while he ran the engine in his garage.

I hope Ellen went as peacefully.

Walker probably won't last long in prison. That's the way they, whoever the hell they are, want it.

LOG ENTRY 22

This is my last entry. I'm getting out of town and I hope none of this follows me.

I'm uploading these files and trashing my hard drive. I don't want anything falling into the wrong hands, but I need a copy to hold onto for my own reference. I hope I get a chance to use it.

I got a package in the mail today. It was payment for keeping tabs on Bill, but there was also a letter criticizing

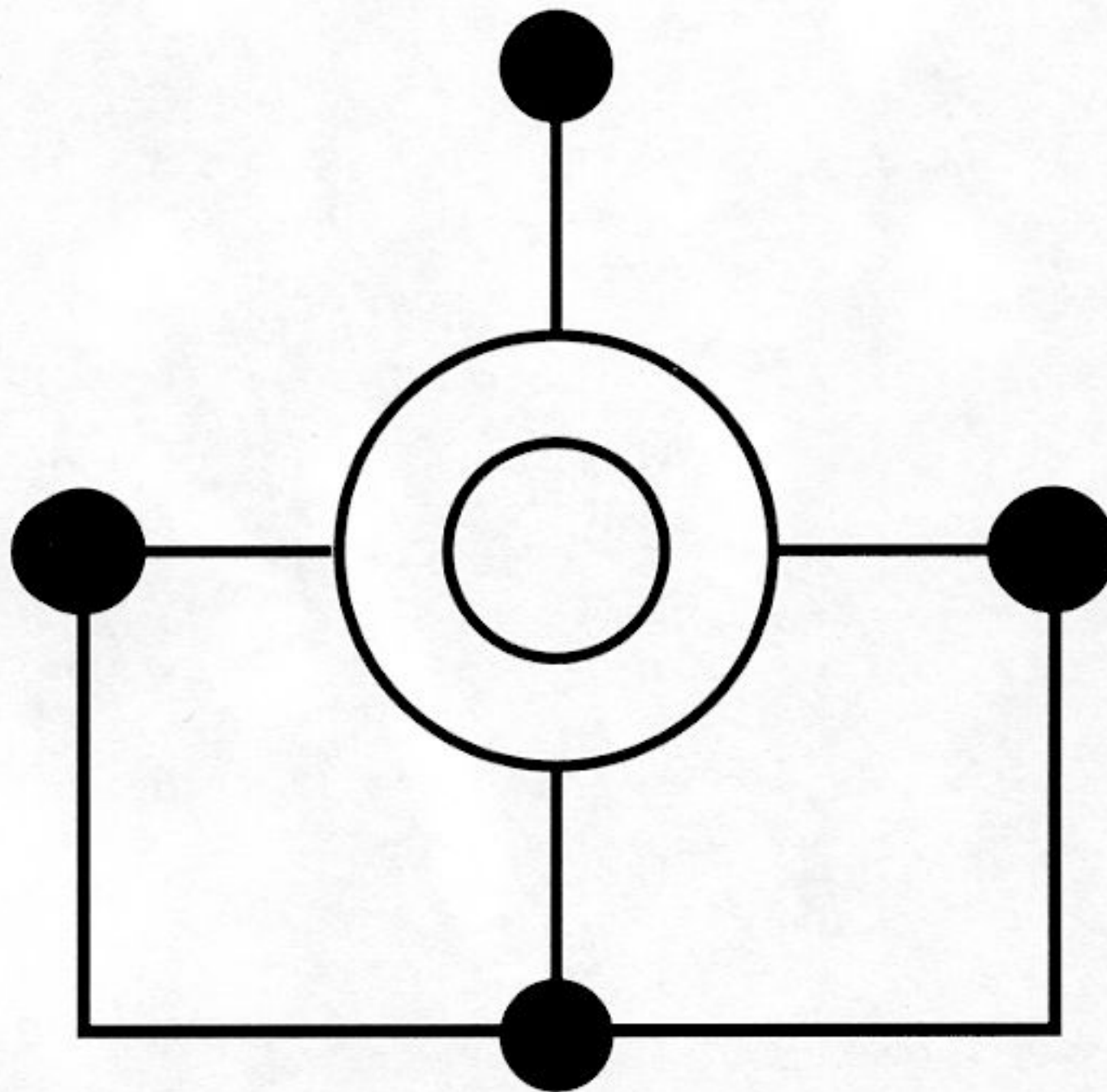
me for failing to report a lot of Bill's activities. It specifically pointed out that I had Bill down for flat out bullshit during his meetings with the others. The letter didn't mention exactly what he was up to. It just said that my contact had good information that Bill wasn't doing what I said he was.

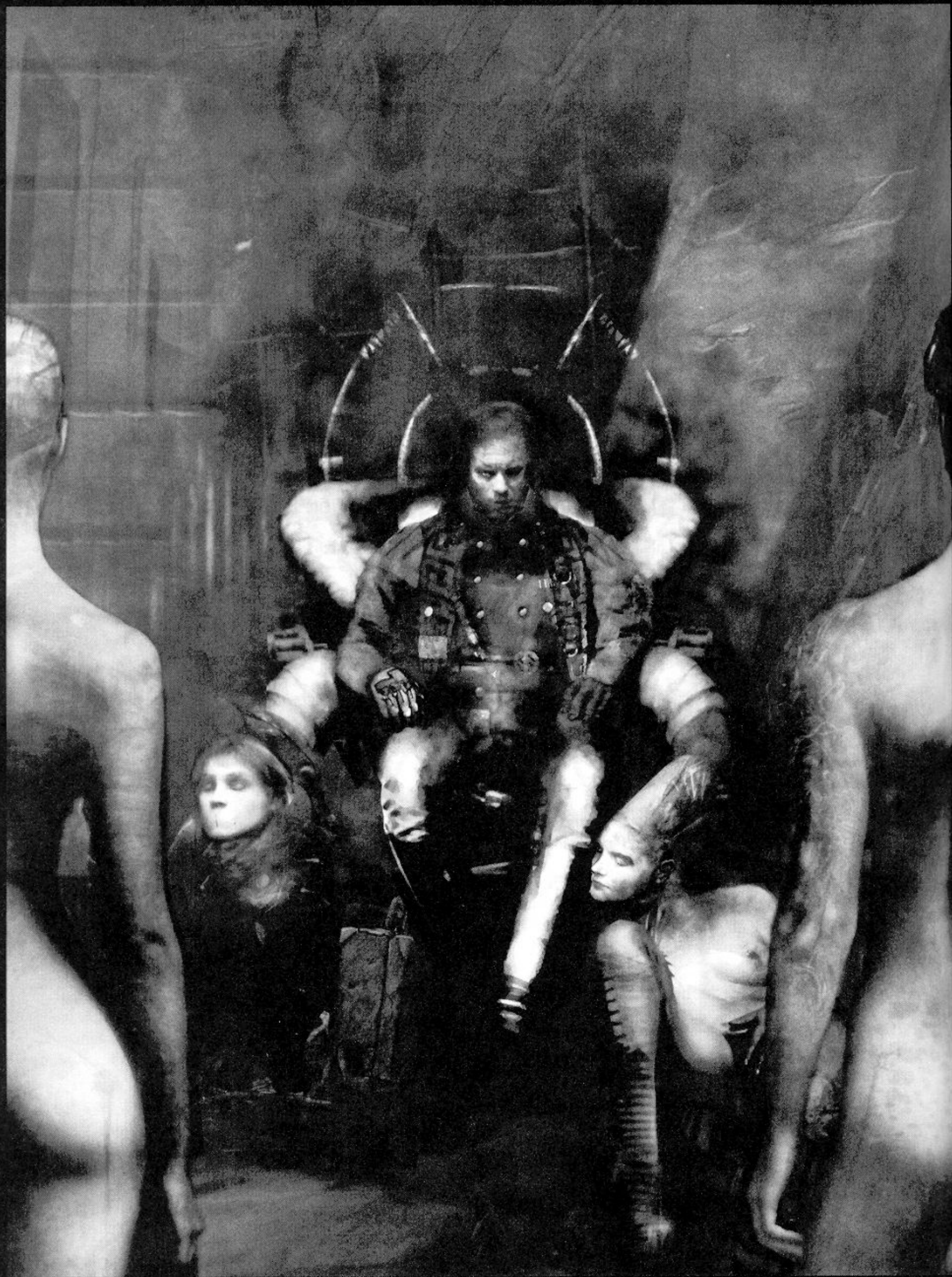
They know.

Part of me wants to believe that my contact had other PIs working on Bill, too, but I don't see that. I'm too good to have missed something like that. There's something far worse behind this. My contact went on

to explain that they felt justified docking my pay. They said they might have overlooked mistakes like that in the past, but that they'd gotten outside information that the particular hours I missed were critical to observing Bill. They warned against making mistakes like that, and made it clear they didn't have much more use for me.

I'm getting the hell out of here. I'll be on a flight out of town by 11. I don't care where I go. It probably doesn't matter. Where do you run to get away from something like this?





CHAPTER 6: BETTER JUDGMENT

*Whoso causeth the righteous to go astray in an evil way,
he shall fall himself into his own pit: but the upright shall have
good things in possession.*

— Proverbs 28:10

Sunday, September 3: Stakeout yielded little to no hard info. Subject Alejandro Ortega — if that is indeed its name — didn't leave house during daylight hours. Ortega, under close scrutiny (aided by the Mind of God) seems to be almost completely inert. This marks a difference between it and the "zombie" that the five of us destroyed in April, as the zombie almost pulsed with raw hatred. This being seems quite cold but possessed of a much subtler and malign intelligence. I have no better way of putting it.

Note to self: Find a way to determine if Ortega can leave the house in sunlight or simply chooses not to do so.

Ortega left the house shortly after sundown (roughly 7 PM). Interesting to note if time changes as sundown gets earlier, assuming Ballew allows surveillance to continue for that amount of time, which I doubt. After he left, I placed a call to Turner to let him know that the subject had left the house, and I went home.

Conclusions: Ortega is, without doubt, a creature of some kind (note to self: find a more appropriate term). Exactly what kind and in what way — if any — he feeds on people remains to be seen.

Follow-up: Turner says he saw Ortega entering a nightclub in a Hispanic neighborhood shortly after I saw him leave his house.

Saturday, September 9: Stakeout continues. Reynolds remarks that Ortega is either very arrogant or very stupid. This neighborhood has no block watch and in three weeks of surveillance, not one of us has been approached by police or anyone else.

Ortega's routines are predictable enough. Every evening he rises at sundown as evidenced by lights in his house. (The small changes in sundown over the past week haven't allowed me to determine if he is bound by time or simply habit). He leaves shortly (within 20 minutes) thereafter and drives to one of a number of nightclubs or bars. Note: Tuesday night (September 5th) he went to a block party, once again in a Latino section of town. Why does he frequent the Hispanic areas? To blend in? Some sense of nostalgia?

Tonight we're trying a new tactic. Livia, while of Greek descent, will blend in better than any of the rest of us could. She will follow him into whatever nightclub he chooses and observe his habits. Ballew and Turner have repeatedly warned her not to approach him until we have more information. I, as usual, stay neutral in this debate.

The Club: Livia has been inside the club for nearly 30 minutes. Reynolds is becoming anxious.

The "blending-in" theory doesn't seem to hold water. Ortega's car alone, not to mention his cultured and educated manner, makes him stand out. So why come to the barrio at all? Reynolds guesses that this area may have held some special significance for Ortega "when he was alive." This makes the assumption, however, that he is dead, and he seems in many ways more alert than the walking corpse we faced before.

Conclusions: Livia was reluctant to tell us, but as usual she realized in the end that holding back information is dangerous.

Ortega struck up a conversation with another woman and danced with her. Livia says she felt some hope for Ortega at that point, as he did not seem to bear the woman any ill will. However, after their dance, the woman left Ortega to make a phone call. The pay phones in the club are located in small alcoves (presumably to deaden the noise). Livia positioned herself to watch the woman. Ortega followed her and according to Livia, bit her on the shoulder from behind. She did not struggle. Ortega had his hands on either side of the alcove; any passerby would think they were making out. It only lasted a few seconds, then he walked away. Livia checked the woman. She was alive, if somewhat confused. The victim told Livia that she "skipped lunch" and was feeling "weak." The victim then found Ortega in the crowd and told him (Livia assumes) that she was tired and needed to go home. Ortega did not protest. Livia reports that there was no noticeable wound on the woman's shoulder.

This opens several possibilities. One is that Ortega is feeding on emotion, but doing it in a much more direct and yet more subtle manner than the other being we encountered (reference point: April 4 through April 26). Another, the one that Livia and Reynolds both assert (and I am inclined to agree with) is that Ortega is feeding directly on his victims, much like a mythical vampire is supposed to. Livia insists that I note that Ortega did not kill his victim. Turner notes, however, that killing in such a public place would draw attention. All evidence suggests that Ortega does not wish to draw attention to himself.

Wednesday, September 13: Several more nights of surveillance on Ortega. No noteworthy events. He follows a pattern: leaves home, goes to club, "feeds" and remains at the club for the better part of the evening. The clubs and bars he frequents have little in common; music and dancing styles vary. Still no acceptable theories on why Ortega sticks to the Hispanic parts of town. Still no information on where he gets his money, although beyond electricity and gas for his car, his expenses may be negligible.

Ballew and Turner argue that since we know his habits and his neighborhood has not had any police

patrols since we began surveillance, we could break in and interrogate Ortega. This requires committing a number of crimes, including breaking and entering, trespassing and probably assault. Ballew also pitches his long-standing "kill 'em all" arguments. Livia has not learned (as Reynolds and I have) that debating with him only fuels his fervor.

Saturday, September 23: Today is the Autumnal Equinox. We met and discussed possibilities concerning Ortega. Ballew's contacts in the police department state that there has not been a violent crime or break-in in Ortega's neighborhood in years. Also, Ortega has no criminal record. He is listed as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, and has been living in the U.S.A. for over 20 years. Turner remarks that he looks young for his age. Ballew takes this as "proof that he's an undead bastard, since he doesn't age," but the difference between his apparent age and his age on paper isn't great enough to prove anything.

Decisions: We have decided, in light of the fact that Ortega is a) "wrong" (not much better than the term "creature") and b) actively feeding on human beings, to enter his house while he is gone, prepare for his return, and interrogate him using fire as a threat. Fire was effective in destroying the corpse in April. We're taking a chance here, but it's a calculated risk. Turner says he'll also bring holy water and a crucifix. He claims those objects have proven useful before. I will videotape the proceedings.

Saturday, September 30: The "interrogation" was a failure. Ortega will not be preying on people any longer, however.

We chose a Saturday night because Ortega stays out longer on Saturdays. We — myself, Ballew and Turner — entered his house an hour after he left. Reynolds and Livia followed Ortega to make sure we knew when he was returning. The alarm system was, in a word, laughable. I disarmed it easily. We set up the main bathroom as our "interrogation room." It had a large cast-iron tub and was two running steps away from the back staircase, which would (and did) enable us to beat a hasty retreat.

Reynolds telephoned at approximately 3 AM to tell us that Ortega was en route. Since he always enters through the front door, we waited in the living room (near the door) and hid. When he walked in, we waited until he locked it and then attacked.

Ballew attempted to pull a cloth bag over his head so he couldn't see us to focus any powers on us (vampires of legend are often portrayed with such abilities). Ortega was extremely fast — he dodged Ballew and ran for the door. Turner then pulled out his crucifix and forced Ortega back. I focused the camera sharply on him and silently invoked the Eye of God. Apparently Ortega, like the corpse we destroyed before, was afraid



of judgment; the Eye rendered him immobile. Ballew grabbed him. Reynolds came in the back door (which we'd left unlocked) and helped us drag Ortega upstairs. He was no stronger than a normal man. Turner reported that his thrashing grew stronger as they reached the bathroom, though.

We dropped him into the tub and immediately poured gasoline on him. He seemed paralyzed with fear — he took no aggressive action. Ballew held a lighter above him and he seemed to understand that we wanted something. Here was where we hit a snag that none of us anticipated — Ortega didn't speak English.

Ballew knows some conversational Spanish, but Ortega was too panicked to puzzle through Ballew's attempts and Ballew was growing angry. After about 10 minutes of fruitless conversation, Ballew lit the lighter and dropped it on Ortega. The flames consumed him in what seemed like seconds (upon reviewing the tape, it actually took over a minute). Ballew and Turner kept him in the tub with shovels until his body was consumed.

Livia arrived as we were running out of the house. She was, of course, upset at the way the "interrogation" had gone. It couldn't be helped, obviously.

While he was burning, Ortega screamed in Spanish. Ballew wrote down what he said as we viewed the tape and says he will translate it, but believes the creature was praying. That gave both myself and Livia pause, especially considering that Ortega was repelled by the crucifix. I wondered aloud if he chose his condition or if it was inflicted on him, to which Livia replied, "We'll never know, will we?" and stormed out. She was upset that she wasn't given a chance to question him. She believes that even with the language barrier, she could have established a "rapport" with Ortega. I regret that we did not learn more than we did, but I don't mourn Ortega's passing.

We did not recover any information from his house. The fire spread despite our best efforts and we were forced to run. We gained little information about Ortega from the whole endeavor. On the whole, a minor victory at best.

Friday, November 10: Livia came by the shop today and asked for a copy of the video, saying that there was "something she wanted to check out." She asked that I not mention the copy to the others. I agreed, but when I made it I edited out any mention of our names. There's enough on that video already. Our names don't need to be there as well.

Saturday, December 2: Hands are shaking badly. Never had one walk right into my store. At first I thought it was coming to avenge Ortega, but it didn't seem to notice my distress.

I was sitting at the desk in back, eating leftover turkey and going over the books for November when I heard the door chime. I walked into the store and saw a man looking over the video cameras. He was slightly taller than me, Caucasian, white shirt, blue jeans, jacket that I thought was too thin for this time of year. Brown hair — odd cut, just below the ears. Looked rather disheveled, actually.

I asked him if he needed anything and he responded that he was just looking. He browsed for a few minutes and then asked when I was closing (this was approx. 8:50 PM). I told him nine o'clock. He nodded and said he'd come back Monday night. As he was leaving, I glanced down at my cash register. I believe I briefly saw the time/date stamp form the word "DEATH" for a moment, although I can't explain how that's possible.

The man stood outside the store for a few minutes. I looked at him more carefully, and he was most certainly wrong somehow. I could simply sense it. I did not have time to invoke the Mind of God. In any event, I have trouble doing so in my shop.

I need to remain focused about this. He made no sign of recognizing me. He didn't even look me in the eye. He seemed interested in the camcorders. I hope he does return. Then I can examine him with a clearer head.

I think I'll wait to let the others know. The only one I'd really want to involve at this stage is Reynolds, and he insists that all developments be shared with everyone immediately. I don't want Ballew going off and attacking this being, or Livia attempting to save it, at least not right away.

Monday, December 4: He (it?) showed up around 7 PM. There were other people in the store, so I couldn't afford to concentrate enough to try and learn about him. However, I did speak with him.

He says he needs a camcorder capable of recording at night, with a good battery. I was able to point him to some good models. He pored over prices for a while, then decided to purchase one (not the top-of-the-line, suggesting that money is a factor). Thinking quickly, I told him that I had none in stock, but was expecting a shipment the next afternoon. He said he'd come by tomorrow night to pick it up.

Actually, I have several in stock, but I wanted a chance to plant a tracking device inside the camera. Hopefully, he'll pay with a check or credit card — something I can use to identify him.

I'm still not convinced that I should alert the others yet. I have no information to give them, really. Allen is scheduled to work tomorrow, so I think I'll drop by and help him out for a while. That will leave him free to work the desk so that I can look more deeply into this being.

Observations: While I was speaking with him, he glanced over the other people in the store. He did not seem to be eyeing them hungrily, but had a strange look on his face. Almost benign, as though he were watching over them. At no time did he make eye contact with me.

Tuesday, December 5: The tracking device is inside the camera and is functioning properly. I recorded several minutes of footage with it, just to make sure the camera still worked as it should, and no problems.

Goals for today, when he shows up: Invoke Mind of God. Try to gain perspective on exactly what he is. My original gut instinct — that he was an associate of Ortega's — seems implausible.

Also, try to get him talking about mundane issues. Job, politics, history. His haircut seems outdated, though that may be coincidence. Perhaps his speech patterns will "date" him further. He has thus far been very taciturn in conversation.

Later: All went as planned. He bought the camera — paid with "old" hundred-dollar bills. I did have a chance to invoke the Mind of God and I am very confused by what I saw.

First, mundane observations. He wore the same clothes as before. His shoes were stained with dirt and mud, as were his jeans. I tried to get him chatting, but his speech didn't suggest any particular locale to me. He is fairly well spoken; grammar is good, but he certainly uses as few words as possible.

The only comment of note that he made was a very disturbing one. Allen has developed a nasty cough, probably due to smoking as well as the weather. While the man and I were talking, Allen began to cough violently. The man looked at him quizzically and then nodded, almost sadly. He said, more to himself than to me, "He doesn't sound good." Then, addressing me directly (though still not making eye contact) he asked if Allen was my only employee. I said that he was. The man nodded again and asked a question about the camera.

I taught him how to use the camera and he was practicing, panning around the store while I "drew up his bill." Actually, I used the time to focus on him. My results were strange. I do not believe the man to be a vampire. While there are certain similarities to Ortega, the differences far outweigh them.

Ortega, for example, seemed inert, as though locked in a perpetual state of death. This new subject — "unsub," for Unknown Subject, Ballew would insist — looked more... interesting? Perhaps interested? Hard to say. His features seemed blackened, almost like a skull. I had noticed before he came in that his breath didn't fog in the cold. Note to self: research legends of effects on selling one's soul.

I think the time has come to report these findings to the others. I think Reynolds will be especially interested in this one. I want to follow this unsub home and see where he sleeps. I have a feeling it will be somewhere connected with death.

Friday, December 8: The others have mixed feelings about my news. None of them are very happy that I waited a few days to inform them, but there's nothing to be done about that. As I anticipated, Reynolds is intrigued by my observations. Ballew, predictably, simply wants to kill it. Turner was an hour late to our meeting. His daughter was in a school play. Ballew was not pleased, but Turner was adamant that he not miss the performance. I'm rather glad I don't have any living family.

Livia seems distracted. I'd have thought this strange man, who might do harm simply via eye contact yet chooses not to, would interest her.

Reynolds and Turner both asserted that we need to watch this being and assess the threat he poses. Livia agreed, but seemed in a hurry to leave. Ballew, as usual, favors an immediate response, but bows to the wisdom of caution. We will track the camera beginning Sunday night.

Sunday, December 10: Strange occurrences tonight. The tracking device led us — myself, Reynolds and Ballew — to an apartment building not far from my shop. The building had a locked outer door. Although Ballew said he could open it, we decided to wait. After nearly two hours, a woman entered the building. Reynolds caught the door and we entered. We traced the device's signal to apartment 202. We listened outside the door and heard a TV. To all appearances, someone was home watching television. I had no way to determine if it was the same man from the shop. Ballew asked if the signal from the camera could be duplicated or "thrown off" somehow. I admitted it was possible but not very likely.

The name on the mailbox for apt #202 was Richard Cho. As Allen is working the store during the day tomorrow, I am going to begin surveillance of this Cho.

Monday, December 11: Cho left his apartment around 8 AM. Drives a late '80s Honda. Went to veterinary hospital two blocks from apartment. Did not carry animal carrier to car. PETA bumper stickers. Might be an employee. Tracking device indicates that camera is still in apartment, but I have no way to get in.

Cho left hospital at 11:45 AM. Lunch at local fast food. Must be employee. I focused on him while he was eating. He looks completely normal. Slightly overweight. Chinese-American. I wonder if he stole the camera? He seems a very upbeat and vital man. Perhaps he is a servant of our mysterious unsub.

Cho returned to the vet's office around 12:45 PM and remained there until after 5 PM. Went directly home. I left shortly thereafter.

Conclusions: I spoke with Reynolds via telephone. He says that he feels Cho is involved somehow. While Reynolds' judgment has always been sound, I questioned him on this. In the end, we decided that the only way to be sure (apart from interrogating Cho, and we're reluctant to try that) is to enter his apartment so that I can examine the camera for tampering. That means contacting Ballew. I have to work tomorrow, so the two of them are going to bring the camera to me at work.

Tuesday, December 12: Ballew and Reynolds arrived with the camera. Ballew apparently opened the deadbolt on Cho's door without difficulty but then knocked over a potted plant and had to spend extra time cleaning up. Ballew insists it would have been simpler to "trash the place and make it look like a robbery," but that wouldn't make sense — a burglar would have stolen the camera (which was on the floor in plain sight, according to Reynolds) and we need Cho to have it back. Cho left and went to work this morning as yesterday, according to Reynolds. The camera is indeed the same one I sold the unsub, and the tracking device has not been moved or tampered with. There was no tape in the camcorder, although Reynolds said that there was a tape sitting on Cho's floor next to the camera, still in the store packaging. Ballew reports that Cho had a calendar on the wall and the 21st was circled. As Reynolds points out, that by itself could mean anything.

The question, obviously, is why Cho now has the camera that the unsub purchased. Ballew and Reynolds reported no occult paraphernalia in Cho's apartment. He does not appear to be hiding anything. Since Cho's apartment is only a short detour for me on my way home, I will drive by his building and check to see if the device is still there (Ballew and Reynolds returned it). We will tail him on the 21st to see where he goes. Reynolds asserts that it's probably a Christmas party. At this point, I'm inclined to agree.

Wednesday, December 20: This is our busy season at the store, and I'm actually glad that I haven't found a solid lead on the unsub yet. Allen's illness has gotten worse. He's called in sick every day this week, leaving me to work 12-hour shifts. Cho has been home every evening that I've driven by, and even when he isn't there the camera is. If I hadn't gotten such a strange feeling and vision when I invoked the Mind of God while looking at the unsub, I'd be tempted to write the whole thing off.

I may need to close early tomorrow if Allen is still ill. Or perhaps Reynolds or Turner could handle surveillance for a change (I wouldn't trust Ballew to do it, and Livia's been inaccessible of late).

Thursday, December 21: Allen is dead.

First thing's first. I never got to follow Cho. I had barely pulled up to his apartment when my cell phone rang. It was a paramedic. A customer found Allen collapsed on the floor of the shop. I left Cho's apartment immediately. I called Reynolds (no answer), Ballew (not home) and finally Turner and told him about the situation. He said he'd get to Cho's apartment as soon as he could. It turned out that by the time he got there, Cho was already gone. It occurred to me much too late that I could have given Turner the tracking device, but at the time I was far too stressed to think of that.

When I got to the store, the paramedics had already taken Allen away. The customer who had discovered him had kindly waited for me to arrive. I thanked him and he left. I closed the shop and discovered (much to my relief) that no money was missing. Sounds callous, I know, but this shop is my life.

Allen died shortly after 11 PM. The diagnosis was congestive heart failure. Surprising for one so young (Allen was 27), so I imagine they'll do an autopsy.

I went home from the hospital and am going to get drunk. As I said, I have no living family. But ever since that man walked into the store, I've had an unshakeable feeling that someone was going to die.

Today, incidentally, is the Winter Solstice. Livia usually thinks things like that are important.

Monday, December 25: Christmas day. I went to church this morning. Allen's service is tomorrow. Nothing else of significance. There is a solar eclipse today, as well, but I don't know what time.

Tuesday, December 26: Allen's service was brief. The eulogy was moved inside the church as opposed to being delivered at the cemetery due to the weather. The weather service reports that the blizzard won't let up until tomorrow. I'm not reopening the shop until Thursday.

Livia, Reynolds and Ballew attended. Turner is superstitious about funerals, but hides it under a pretense of services being "for the living, not the dead." The cemetery gave us a chance to talk, despite the cold.

Ballew was insistent that Allen's death was not natural. The autopsy report, which I told his parents I needed to see because of the benefits package Allen had through the shop (a lie, of course) did not reveal anything untoward. It simply showed that Allen's lungs had been deteriorating for some time and the bronchial infection he'd picked up, added to his smoking habit, simply became too much for his body to handle.

Reynolds said he understood if I wanted to sit out of this investigation. I told him I was all right, that I'd grieve on my own time. Ballew seemed impressed with my strength, but Reynolds just nodded, as if unsure. Livia seemed to feel I was hiding something.

I agreed to continue investigating Cho and the unsub because, frankly, I have little else to do. Before God visited me, I was content to run my shop and tinker with my toys, alone. But then... it's not important. This record is to help me remember details of the investigation, not to share my thoughts.

But it does me good sometimes to get them out.

I suppose it's natural, in the event of a death, to wonder who would attend my funeral. I suspect only the others that do God's work with me. The cemetery seemed so empty in winter.

Enough of that. All five of us are meeting tonight to discuss our next course. I'm going to recommend we break into Cho's apartment again and see if anything has been recorded on the camera.

Later: The others accepted my plan. Ballew, Reynolds and I are going to enter Cho's apt tomorrow while he works. Livia is going to bring her cat to the office to make sure he doesn't run home for any reason. Turner will watch the apt building from his van. Hopefully there's something there worth finding.

Wednesday, December 27: The blizzard let up a little in the morning. We watched Cho leave for work. Livia called us when she reached the office and reported seeing him in the hallway. Ballew opened the deadbolt with an odd-looking tool. I reflect again how little I know about these people, compared to how much they know about me. I have no idea what Ballew does for a living that requires him to know how to pick locks. Of course, it could be a skill he picked up post-Visitation.

The three of us entered the apartment. It was much as the others had reported: clean and unremarkable. A lot of PETA paraphernalia, but nothing that would indicate Cho as an activist. The refrigerator revealed him to be a fairly strict vegetarian. Ballew reacted with derision. I think Ballew could stand to cut down on the red meat a little himself.

The camera was there and there was a tape in it on which Cho had recorded perhaps an hour of footage. I had the foresight to bring a recorder/player with me so that we could copy anything we found. I made a copy of the tape and then advanced it back to the same position. The tracking device was, again, undisturbed.

We searched the rest of the apartment but found nothing remarkable. Cho is, to all appearances, a normal man. The material on the tape he shot, however, proved appearances to be misleading.

We left the apartment and adjourned to my shop. Livia joined us shortly thereafter. She reported that Cho did not leave the office while she was there, and that her cat was in fine health.

The tape revealed that the unsub is the leader of some form of group or even cult. Cho was taping a meeting of this group, apparently at the leader's

behest. We counted ten members, including Cho, plus the leader (whom the members referred to as "Gideon"). I couldn't figure out the location, only that though they were inside, the structure wasn't heated, as their breath fogged.

The meeting did not seem to involve anything resembling a sacrifice. It actually looked more like group therapy, at least for the first half-hour or so. Everyone sat in a tight circle, discussing death. Gradually, we realized that some of the deaths they discussed had been reported in the papers lately (beyond the obituaries). A young man killed in a drunk-driving accident. A woman beaten to death by her husband. The "cultists" did not express sorrow or any discernable emotion, and the leader simply sat among them with the same benevolent look that I saw at the shop.

During these discussions, I again noticed (and pointed out) that the leader's breath did not fog as the cultists' did. Also, at no time did he make eye contact with any of the cultists. He would occasionally speak — usually to correct pronunciation of a name or a cause of death — but did not offer any opinion on the deaths.

The last death mentioned was that of Allen Gainor, my employee. One of the cultists mentioned that he died of heart failure while at work, and the leader — Gideon — nodded and said, "I saw him a few days before his time. I don't think he was ready, but that's not our problem, I'm afraid." What he said next scared and angered me (and, I think, the rest of us): "When I came to him that night, he asked for a few more days to try to recover. I granted him that, but in the end, he wasn't strong enough to pull through. He was buried yesterday, not far from here."

Ballew was both incensed and vindicated. Here, he felt, was proof that this "Gideon" had taken a direct hand in Allen's death. Reynolds wasn't so sure. After all, nothing Gideon said revealed that he had any inside information on how Allen died, or gave any hint of a motive. In fact, both Reynolds and Livia felt that Gideon might simply be an insane if charismatic man with an obsession for death who managed to find a few like-minded disciples. Had the Mind of God not shown me otherwise, I might have agreed. We paused the tape to let Ballew vent a little and then resumed.

After these last few comments, Gideon stood and walked among them. The camera followed him, and for the first time I could see that they were in a very small room with stone walls and a stone floor, almost like a cellar or mausoleum. Gideon began delivering what seemed like a sermon, and despite myself, I found that I was nodding along with the cultists (Livia and Turner were as well, so I didn't feel too bad). The gist of the sermon was simply that death isn't a malevolent force that strikes at random — it is,

instead, simply a force. Everyone dies on something of a schedule, according to Gideon, and sometimes people try to cheat or sidestep the schedule, as Allen had presumably done.

I remembered then that Gideon had asked if Allen was my only employee, and then shaken his head as though he knew hard times were ahead for me. I swallowed that thought and kept watching.

Gideon made some references to funerals and death-related beliefs of various cultures. Livia copied these down and says she'll research their veracity (to prove or disprove Ballew's assertion that Gideon was "talking out of his ass"). Regardless of how well informed he is on that particular aspect of sociology, Gideon is an amazing speaker. His voice and bearing made the sermon less like a mandate or a lecture and more like a conversation, although none of the other cultists did anything more than sit, rapt, while he spoke. I could see why.

After his sermon, Gideon turned to face them and asked an odd question: "Is anyone ready?" One woman stood. She looked about 30, Caucasian, slightly overweight, bundled in a heavy coat and mittens. Gideon approached her and said something very quietly. I had to rewind and tinker with the sound to hear what he said. It was a question, "What do you leave behind, Ann?" She considered and then answered — I think the first thing she said was, "My brother," but Gideon stopped her.

"No," he said, "That's not the answer. You'll have to wait." He held her close, almost tenderly. She wrapped her arms around him tightly, apparently crying. He then whispered to her again, this time asking her to remain behind after the meeting.

He turned to the rest and told them (though it seemed to be more a reminder) that their membership in the cult (he said "your presence here") gave them some say over when death would take them. He then dismissed them. They left and walked out of the building. Cho did not turn around to film the building (why would he?) but by that time I knew where they were, having visited the cemetery the day before.

The group of them walked to the parking lot, not speaking. Cho's camera passed over the other cars for only a few seconds, and only showed enough to get the makes and models of a few of them. He got to his own car and turned off the camera.

We sat there in silence for a moment. This was something new and frightening. In the case of the zombie, our course of action was simple because the being was causing damage to people and property. In the case of Ortega, our plan went awry but I still felt justified in destroying him (as he had been preying on

people directly). With Gideon and his followers, however, the only thing that they are obviously guilty of is trespassing. Even Ballew was hard-pressed to find a reason to kill Gideon.

I was the one to suggest aggressive action, for a change. Gideon may not be dead or "undead" (his missing breath notwithstanding), I told the others, but he is most certainly one of the creatures God tapped us to find and destroy. Livia and Reynolds both hemmed and hawed at that (neither of them admit that it was God's will that opened their eyes; I feel that realization will come in time). Ballew agreed with me, saying he trusted my judgment. Turner said that until he sees some real proof that Gideon is harmful, he'll have no part in this investigation. And damn it, he was quite right. I need more proof.

As Livia is on Christmas break at the moment, she says she'll scout the cemetery during the day and try to find the mausoleum where the meeting took place. I gave her a digital camera to take along. We agreed that the meeting must have been held on or before the 21st, because the snow on the ground was very light.

There's a lot I need to do. I need to hire a new employee so that I can have the occasional day to devote to surveillance. I wonder how much I could get for selling the shop? No, strike that. I'll post a "Help Wanted" sign tomorrow.

Thursday, December 28: No phone call from Livia today. Reynolds says he'll start combing hunter-net for references to cults formed around the things we fight (still want a better term).

Friday, December 29: Two applications in today. Start interviews Tuesday. Livia emailed me photos. She found the mausoleum. She reports that the door was chained and fastened with a very new-looking padlock, so she couldn't enter. She also mentioned that a groundskeeper approached her and asked what she was doing. Odd, considering that a lot of people wander through cemeteries. She made some excuse and took a photo of the groundskeeper (mostly profile, as she didn't want him to notice). The caretaker is, without a doubt, one of the people in the video. Livia did not think to focus on the caretaker. However, she did mark the door of the mausoleum with a symbol meaning something along the lines of "infested" (reference point: code symbols, March 2).

Monday, January 1: Happy New Year. No invitations to parties. Went to one last year with Allen. Just as well. What if someone at the party turned out to be a creature? What if I saw such a being while drunk? Best that I stay home.

Reynolds emailed me with some information he found on the net about cults. I haven't been on hunter-net in months. Wonder if my screen name is still active?

Drake: Here's what I found on the net about cults, for what it's worth.

To: clockwatcher332

From: bookworm55

Subject: cults

Having done a little research into what makes a cult a cult (as opposed to a club), and then doing a little extrapolation and collecting what little data exists on cults run by various creatures, here's what I've come up with:

A cult pulls people away from their families. The cult is made to seem more important than any other facet of a person's life.

Cult leaders are often either deranged (megomania and delusions of grandeur are common) or have an agenda and use dupes to achieve it.

Cult members often have inflated opinions of their importance, but their self-esteem might not be all that great. Then you get the combination of "these people know my real worth" and "Wow! These people think I'm cool!" That's a very seductive combination to the right kind of person.

Cults that involve crimes from theft to murder are usually led to believe that the "system" is corrupt and that they're above the law.

While tales of SRA (Satanic Ritual Abuse) are rife in tabloids, there's no hard evidence of a multi-generational cult; one that breeds babies in special camps and murders dozens or hundreds of people each year. There is, however, hard evidence of people who claim that they were abused by cults and who have serious psychological issues as a result. Draw your own conclusions.

And now for the "other side." Well, taking what we know about cultists and cult leaders, what we call "warlocks" seem most likely to form cults. If Purple is any example, they can apparently cause freaky coincidences at will — and potential cult members would eat that crap up, I expect. Nothing says that warlocks can't be deranged (and they certainly seem to have agendas), so I'd say if you've got a cult with some otherworldly being as the leader, he's probably a warlock. If you like, I'll send along some of the stories and legends I've dug up on warlocks/witches/sorcerers and so forth.

As for the rest of the horrors out there, who knows? Could a ghost possess someone into starting (or joining) a cult? Maybe even a shapechanger — there's the old belief that werewolves were just warlocks who sold their souls to gain the power to change. If you find any good evidence, let me know.

Wednesday, January 3: Training with Dee (my new employee) took up the whole shift. That, and dealing with inevitable returns after Christmas. I get so tired of re-iterating our "no returns" policy. Anyway, she left around 5 PM, leaving me to cover the evening shift alone, which was fine — fairly dea... uh, uneventful.

When I got home last night, there was a message on my machine from Reynolds, asking if I could meet with the group. I called back and said that I couldn't — no one to man the shop. Reynolds suggested meeting in my backroom at the store. I refused. He sounded annoyed, but I don't see him offering up his cubicle. I fell asleep. Didn't even bother with recording yesterday.

Thursday, January 4: We all met tonight at my store. I'm going to have very strong words with Reynolds later. I only had to get up once or twice to see to customers, but that isn't the point. This is my shop. I don't want this part of my life to blur with what we do.

Anyway, despite my grumbling, we talked about Gideon and his cult. We know the names and occupations of two of the cultists. (Cho, obviously, and the groundskeeper. Livia informs us his name is Eugene Smith.) We also know at least one place where they meet. Reynolds guesses that the mausoleum has some significance beyond simply being a meeting place. I agree. Otherwise, it wouldn't be locked and guarded.

Tailing Cho has proven to be easy and uneventful. Tailing Smith might be a bit more revealing, but given the nature of his job (and the fact that he seems more observant than Cho), it might be hard to accomplish.

We also talked over Bookworm55's comments about cults. Once again, Livia pointed out that we don't have any evidence of wrongdoing on the part of Gideon or his people. In the end, we decided that we need to find out where Gideon resides and what kind of creature he is before we take any real action. The mark of a true compromise, this left no one happy.

Wednesday, January 10: Made some phone calls today and met with Turner and Reynolds this evening (Dee was kind enough to cover the evening shift on short notice).

There's no listing for anyone by the name of Gideon in the greater Columbus area. Since Dee is working tomorrow evening as well, Reynolds and I are going to go to the cemetery tomorrow to have a look around.

Later: Livia called and apologized for missing my call. She reports that the references Gideon made to different funeral rites are accurate.

Thursday, January 11: The cemetery offered some interesting information. As we approached, we saw Smith driving away, his shift done for the day. He didn't give us a second look. Reynolds noted the make and model of his car as well as the plate.

We found the mausoleum and were surprised to note that it was not locked. Entering, we discovered a casket that was not present during the meeting. If not for Livia's mark on the door, we would have thought we had the wrong place. We started looking around more carefully. Reynolds asked me to keep watch. Meanwhile, he walked around the casket, muttering to himself. I realized that he was mentally re-creating the meeting that we saw on the video. Sometimes when he does this he somehow gains information that he should not privy be to, as if he were actually there. God works in mysterious ways.

He eventually came out of the mausoleum and closed the doors. He informed me that Gideon and Smith (whom neither of us thought to focus on, damn it) had moved the casket back into the mausoleum after the meeting, and then locked the door. Gideon then apparently said something to Smith about the next month's meeting being on the dark moon, but not at this locale. The darkroom at the university, instead.

Later: Livia confirms that there is a darkroom at the university, and told us how to get there. Turner says he'll find the exact location tomorrow. The "dark moon" — presumably the new moon — is January 24th. All five of us will be waiting for the cultists. We've already reminded Ballew that we aren't staging an assassination unless we see a direct threat to human life.

Monday, January 22: Livia's information about class times was accurate, and as she stated, many of the classrooms are unlocked at night. With Reynolds' help, I've set up cameras in the darkroom, one of which has a night-vision lens. I've also planted several listening devices. There's a room upstairs from the darkroom that'll let us see and hear the meeting. There seem to be no classes in the building past about 7 PM, so it's easy to see why Gideon chose it. As long as we don't run across any security, we should be fine.

Thursday, January 25: We staked out the meeting last night as planned, but fate threw a major wrench in the works.

Livia didn't make the rendezvous at my shop, and we couldn't reach her. When we couldn't wait any longer, we left and made our way to the university, entering the building through the front entrance (the back door leads directly to a staircase to the darkroom and so we figured we could avoid the cultists by entering through the front). We arrived early, as it turned out, but Gideon and Smith were both present. Also present was another man: mid 20s, brown hair, nondescript. He was dressed for the weather better than Gideon was. They spoke, but seemed to be dodging the topic at hand — a lot of indefinite pronouns: "it," "they," "that." Smith remained completely silent during the exchange. Finally, the other man handed Gideon an envelope and

said, "This is from Kingston. This is the last time he's making this request, okay?" Then he left.

We had stationed Ballew on the other side of the building so he could watch who came and went, and we called his cell phone and told him to look for the man coming out. Within seconds, he called back, frantically whispering, "He's a vampire! He's a fucking vampire! Get down here, now!" We left the recording equipment running, met up with Ballew and followed the man.

Turner drove the van. I invoked the Mind of God and decided with guarded confidence that this new player was indeed a creature. Whether a vampire or not, I wasn't sure. Following him was difficult, because he stayed on campus. Finally, he began driving slowly as though looking for someone. I had Turner let me out. By calling on the Sight of God, I can see in the dark quite well and felt I could follow the being on foot. The others turned off onto a side road, meaning to circle back and pick me up.

What I saw next frightened me horribly. The vampire had indeed slowed down to look for someone — *Livia*. She walked out from a parking lot, got into his car and they drove away. I was too stunned to say anything. After watching long enough, I was confident that this being was a vampire. There were too many similarities to that creature Ortega. Fortunately, *Livia* still seemed the same. But what was she doing?

The others came back and picked me up. I decided not to tell them what I saw — for now. I simply said that I lost the man. We drove back to the building and listened in on the meeting. It followed much the same format as before, except that the sermon was slightly different (and Gideon's voice still had a hypnotic, compelling quality, perhaps even more so than before since we were hearing it live). It was hard to focus. I was worried about *Livia*. I know she can take care of herself. I just hope she doesn't let her idealism get the better of her common sense.

No one said they were "ready" this time, though the woman who did at the last meeting (*Ann*) was present. *Cho* was also present, videotaping again. When the meeting ended, they all left, and I focused the Mind of God on Gideon as much as I could. I was left with the same images as before — he was cold or rather unconcerned about cold in general. And yet, something about him seemed vital.

I haven't voiced these feelings to the others. I haven't figured out what they mean yet. Reynolds tried to invoke his own perspective of the Mind of God (he does not refer to it as such), which has revealed a weakness in a creature in the past. But he said it wasn't working for some reason. Perhaps because he wasn't actually "seeing" Gideon, but only watching him through a camera. I don't see why that should make a difference.

Later: Ballew feels we should have attacked Gideon when we had the chance, but also stated that the new vampire should become a primary target. I agreed, but I think my reasons differ. For one thing, I fear for *Livia*. For another, I have my own plan as far as Gideon is concerned.

Friday, February 2: I spoke with *Livia* and told her what I saw. She begged me not to tell the others. I agreed on the condition that she tell me when and where she intends to meet the vampire again, and that she not miss any more of our meetings. Also, I asked her to tell me his name, which she did: John Samuels. She has no information about Gideon and is afraid to ask Samuels for fear that it will reveal her association with us. She says she's interested in saving his soul. I feel that her goal is noble, but I have no idea how well it will work.

Livia also identified the cultist named *Ann*. She happens to work at a different university library than *Livia*. I took the morning off and went to the library. Sure enough, she was there. I asked for help finding books on funeral rites, specifically citing some of the practices that Gideon had mentioned. It worked. Before long, we were getting along famously. I focused on her and found (much to my relief) that she, like *Cho*, is human.

As we talked, I mentioned that it was too bad the university didn't teach a sociology class focused on death mythology and so forth, as I would like to have an expert opinion on the "paper I was writing." She said she knew someone who could help, but that she wouldn't see him until the end of the month. When I asked for details, she hesitated, but eventually told me about the cult. She referred to it as a "group of people who're interested in the same thing." But when I steered the conversation to Gideon (she told me his name), she took on an odd glow. She said that he was "perfect." I found it hard to keep a straight face, but managed. We exchanged phone numbers and she said she would call me when she found out where the meeting was going to be.

I realize that attending a meeting is a risk, but I want to know more about Gideon. Is he dead or simply death-like? Is he malevolent in any way? He seems inherently wrong, as did the corpse and Ortega (and Samuels, for that matter), but something about him also seems... noble? No, that's not right. I'm not sure how to explain it.

Saturday, February 3: *Ann* called today. The meeting is on the 23rd, in the back stock room of a local office-supply store (apparently Gideon often takes advantage of his followers' workplaces to hold meetings). I checked the date and sure enough — the new moon.

No further information on John Samuels. *Livia* has been remiss in her part of the agreement, but I'm

hesitant to tell the others. We hadn't suspected any organization between creatures, but since some appears to exist, moving against either Gideon or Samuels might upset the other. I want more information before I report my findings.

Wednesday, February 14: I find myself growing impatient for the meeting. Intellectual curiosity, plus the chance to observe the enemy close-up with no real danger (I hope). Meanwhile, I've had the chance to watch Livia with Samuels. He's made no attempt to feed on her, and although she refuses to allow me to bug whatever room they talk in, their conversations have the look of confessions. Even so, my heart's in my throat every time they're together. I keep waiting for him to lunge for her.

Saturday, February 24: So much to get down. And my memory is.... All right, focus.

Went to the meeting in the back stock room. Met some of the other cultists beforehand. Very normal people. Not one "creature" among them. Besides the librarian and the vet tech, there's a secretary, a couple of students, a mortician (fitting) and a *doctor*. About all they seem to have in common is a fanatical regard for Gideon, and an interest in death — specifically, their own.

The meeting was mechanically much the same as the two I viewed. However, I cannot even begin to describe the difference between watching Gideon speak on tape and hearing him in person. I was focused the entire time, and although Gideon is most certainly "other" (as is Smith — perhaps some sort of servant?), it is nearly impossible to watch and listen to him and not be enthralled. I'm almost sure that he doesn't use any kind of mind-altering power to generate the effect, either. I felt clear and in control the entire time. Although I felt God telling me that something was wrong with Gideon, I also felt his undeniable wisdom and power.

Perhaps some sort of power did slip through my focus?

After the meeting, he stopped me and asked if I was the man who sold him the camera. I feigned surprise — trying to create the illusion that I had met Ann by chance and knew nothing about him. I don't think he bought it, but he looked pleased to see me.

When I got home, there was a message on my machine from Reynolds. He wanted to know if I'd found anything else out about the cult or about Samuels. He also said that there's an "Alfred Kingston" on the Board of Trustees of the university, and that he lives on the south side of town (reference point: January 25). He suggested a meeting tomorrow.

Sunday, February 25: The meeting today shocked me a bit. It's been a few weeks, after all. I didn't tell them about the *other* meeting I attended, but I did tell

them that I'd identified and located Ann (Livia looked at me strangely, but didn't speak up). I said that I had no news about Samuels, but that I knew when Gideon's next meeting was going to be and that Smith (the groundskeeper) is somehow "wrong," some sort of slave to Gideon. That got me re-thinking my fascination with Gideon.

I believe I'll lead my group to Gideon and let them destroy him. He's no god or leader. He's simply a charismatic creature of some kind, and he radiates death. He needs to be put down. I voiced these concerns to the group. All agreed — even Livia.

Gideon's next meeting is March 9th. The full moon, for a change. I have no idea what the significance of that is. I don't know where the meeting will be yet, but as soon as I find out, we'll form a plan.

Wednesday, March 7: Don't have much time. Need to try to remember what happened.

Tuesday night, shortly before 11 PM, I think, someone knocked on my door. I answered without using the goddamned peephole. It was Smith. He said I needed to go with him, that Gideon was waiting. I was terrified and completely unprepared. I thought about calling on the Eye of God to freeze Smith in place and then run to call the others, but I didn't. I simply followed him.

Gideon was driving. I rode in the front passenger seat. Smith got in back. We got on the highway and Gideon started talking. I don't remember all of what he said, but I remember he started by calling me an enigma. I asked him what he meant.

"I mean," he said (I'm guessing at his exact words), "that you seem to have a better understanding than the others. Not of death, exactly, but of judgment." At the word "judgment" I felt my stomach lurch. Did he know what I was? If so, could he tell me? "Perhaps you can grasp the truth?" I could only nod.

He didn't turn to me, but just watched the road. "I am Death," he said. "Or, more specifically, I am a physical manifestation of Death. Even when I was alive, I was Death, but ever since my death and rebirth, I have done my job here on Earth." He paused. My head was reeling. I concentrated and saw what I always saw when I focused on Gideon — a mad pattern of blacks and blues around his body. No breath, and cold flesh. I knew — felt? — that Gideon was a walking corpse, but that seemed so at odds with *him*, with the knowledge and intelligence that he projects.

He continued: "If I look into a person's eyes, I know their time and cause of death. I often choose not to look. I do not kill, even if I am present when they die."

I finally found my voice. "So, when you ask at the meetings if anyone is ready...?"

He smiled. "Yes. If anyone is ready to die... on their own terms."



"Has anyone ever..." I couldn't even swallow. I felt something like revulsion and reverence. I couldn't figure out which.

"Oh, yes." We both sat in silence for a moment. I think I asked something about Allen. He simply shook his head — he wasn't prepared to tell me what happened there.

Then the cop pulled us over.

Gideon rolled down the window and looked up. The cop was drenched — it was raining and we could barely see the road in front of us. Gideon said something to him, but I couldn't hear over the rain.

The cop took a few steps back toward the highway. I heard the truck blare its horn, but I didn't hear the impact (thank God). Gideon quickly started the car and got off the highway at the next exit before the truck had even stopped. We pulled into my apartment complex and he parked. "You see what I mean?" he said. "I have to remain impartial. I cannot feel sorry for that police officer. It was simply his time."

I think I nodded. Gideon turned to me and looked me in the eye. I wanted to ask, but couldn't bring myself to do it. "You need to make a decision," he said. "You need to decide if you're coming to the meeting. If you are, it needs to be for the right reasons." I felt like I was going to throw up. I looked around the car for any sign

from God, for some clue or instruction, but He was silent. I knew that if I brought the others to the meeting, it wouldn't make any difference to Gideon. How can you kill Death? Whether he was Death or not, he believed it. The question was, did I?

I opened my mouth. I had no idea what I was going to say. I asked him where the meeting was going to be. He told me. I won't say where here.

I got out of the car. He drove away. I waited until the taillights were gone and fell to my knees, crying. I don't know how long I was there. I still felt sick when I walked inside. Part of it was fear. Part of it was guilt. But mostly, I felt relief that Gideon knew what I didn't: What I am. I trusted him with that knowledge.

Thursday, March 8: I contacted the others and told them that our meeting this month was postponed and that I'd keep them posted. They were disappointed. Dee worked a full shift for me today. Not sure what to do.

Saturday, March 10: Went to Gideon's meeting. The Death-thing makes too much sense. He spoke about the cop — knew his full name and badge number. The papers called it an accident. Next meeting, April 7th.

Friday, March 23: Been reading about death myths and so forth. Probably could write a paper. Haven't spoken to the others lately. Livia called me and asked me to do

something, but I didn't write it down and I can't remember what she wanted. Probably not all that important.

Friday, April 6: Problems. Meeting's tomorrow, but the others want my help. Turns out that they've been looking into Kingston and think he's a blood-sucker. They plan to hit his house tomorrow night and want my help. I've got to make Death's meeting, but couldn't tell them that.

I think Gideon will understand if I'm late. I'll have to get away as soon as I can. I haven't been feeling as though God is trying to warn me off — the sick feelings haven't happened again. I know that Death is simply a part of the world, I just never knew that it was so literal. But if I can believe in vampires and ghosts — and even in the things that I've seen Ballew do — I can believe that Death walks the Earth. And he's been right every time, with Allen, with the cop. He *knows* those people, knows their names and details about them. He visits them, he says, and we shouldn't feel bad for them.

This probably isn't the place for these thoughts. But why not? I'm doing this to make sure I remember important things.

Sunday, April 8: Ballew and Turner are dead. Reynolds knew nothing about the attack on Kingston.

He wasn't even there. Ballew bullied Turner into it. We pulled up to break in and saw another car pull up. Samuels and Livia got out. I said I'd guard Ballew and Turner's backs. They went in.

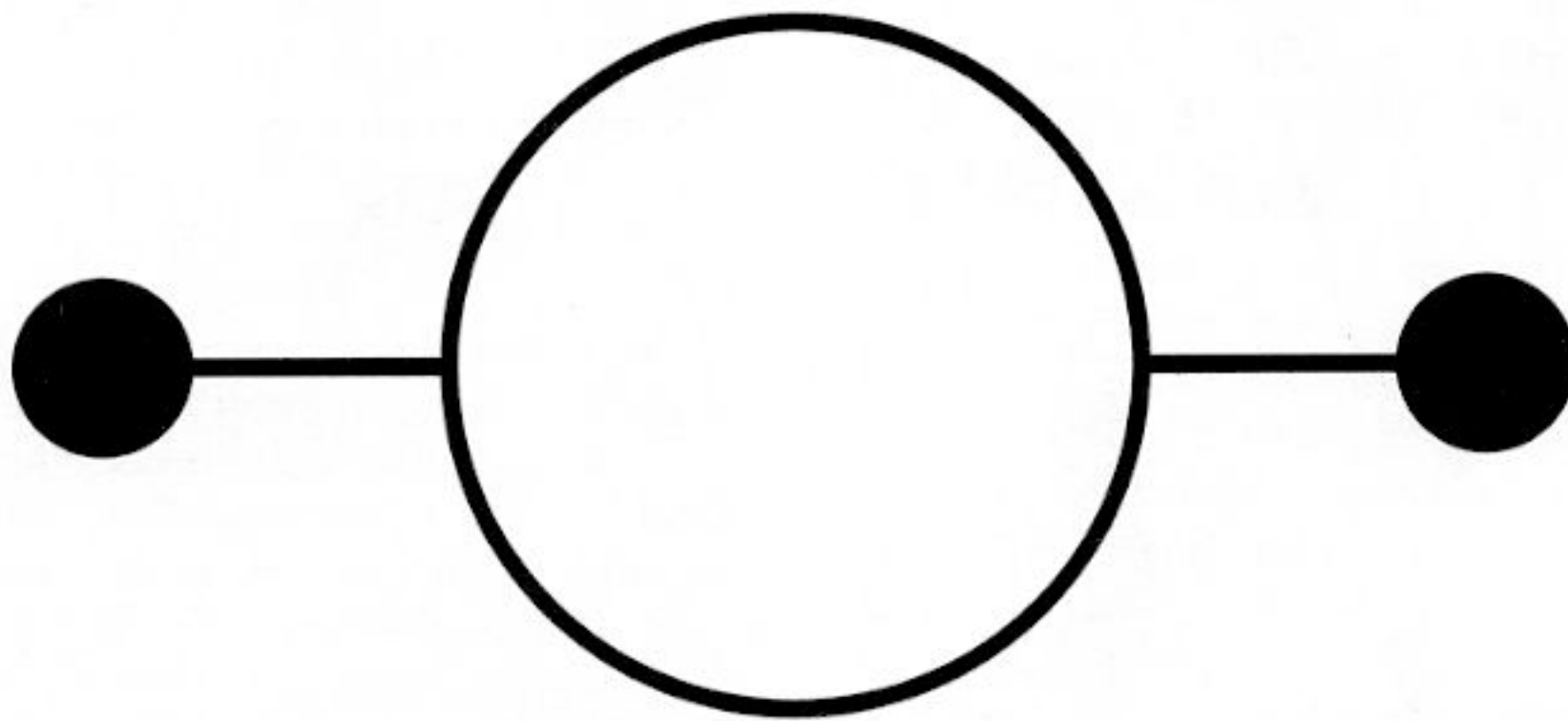
I heard gunshots and got back in the van. Livia ran out, found me and got in. She was bleeding and saying something about Ballew shooting her and then Samuels killing Ballew and Turner. I'd never seen a gunshot wound before. She kept pressure on it, but all the while I kept checking the rear-view mirror, as though Gideon might just appear.

I dropped Livia off at the hospital. She wasn't badly injured; she walked in. Then I went to Gideon's meeting. It wasn't far.

I was late, but as I hoped, Gideon didn't mind. I asked him if he'd been at the house earlier that night. He said, "In a way."

At the end of the meeting, he asked if anyone was ready. Ann said she was. He asked the same question as before: What was she leaving behind? This time, he got the answer he wanted.

She was smiling. She said, "Everything." He kissed her and she died. We all felt for her, but not sad. She got what she wanted. We should all be so lucky.





CHAPTER 7: RULES AND STORYTELLING

*For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as
were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow,
and there is none abiding.*

— 1 Chronicles 29:15

VAMPIRES IN HUNTER

Every culture on Earth has legends about vampires. People seem to have a fascination with blood. Symbolism and mythology about it permeate our religions, our media and our literature. So it's only natural that one of the oldest and most constant embodiments of our fears should feed on our sacred blood.

In the World of Darkness, vampires are very real. They hide, they skulk and they prey on humanity, and they have been around since prehistory. So many legends have sprung up around them that, although literature and information on them is accessible and plentiful, the imbued have no hope of learning anything true about vampires simply by studying popular culture about them. To learn the facts, hunters must hunt.

This chapter contains everything you as Storyteller need to use vampires as adversaries in **Hunter: The Reckoning**. Some of this material was covered in the **Hunter Storytellers Companion**; that information is expanded here. Here, you have information on exactly how vampires reproduce, some of the unholy powers they are likely to have, and the best ways to use them to challenge your troupe's characters. This information also expands on the material presented in the "Building

Better Monsters" section of the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** (p. 47).

If you are a player, please do not read any further. Familiarity, after all, deadens the horror of confronting these monsters. Don't spoil the surprises.

THE FACTS OF UNLIFE

What follows are the "nuts and bolts" of vampirism: how vampires are created, what they do with their (copious) time, and so on. Not all vampires know all of these facts about their own existence or kind, so hunters should have to work carefully to uncover them. Doing so might be accomplished in numerous ways. Perhaps a group of hunters spies upon vampires, much like the hunters in Chapter 6 do. Perhaps they follow a bloodsucker's cronies during the day or try to link the vampire to mortal businesses via a paper trail. Or maybe they take the direct approach: tie down the leech and threaten him with incineration unless he talks.

None of these investigative methods is foolproof, of course. Vampires lie, even under duress. And as stated, many of them don't even know "the truth" about themselves. Any "fact" that hunters learn through observation or otherwise must be tested before any real conclusions can be drawn — and many hunters don't

know how to interpret or test the data they uncover. In short, the following truths about nocturnal existence are for you only. Even if hunters think they learn a secret about the vampiric state, they can misunderstand it, be misled about it or simply be dead wrong and find out the truth the hard way. The imbued shouldn't just fall into the great mysteries of the undead. These beings have existed in secret for millennia. Just because some plumber suddenly has the power to see dead people doesn't mean she unravels ages of deception on a fluke. Chances are she, like the hunters you read about in the preceding chapters, learns just enough to be dangerous — mostly to herself.

CREATING VAMPIRES

Legends about vampires give many different causes for vampirism. Some tales claim that bodies not interred in holy ground rise as bloodsuckers, whereas in others a victim must suffer a bite from a vampire. In the World of Darkness, the truth is that vampires choose their progeny very carefully.

To create another vampire, the would-be "parent" must drain a human to the point of death and then feed her some of his own blood. How much is irrelevant. Even a drop begins the change. The human dies and rises almost immediately thereafter as a vampire (usually in a ravenous hunger). Ordinarily, the parent teaches his new fledgling about the mysterious society and the rules of etiquette that creatures of the night affect. Sometimes, the young vampire is merely left to fend for herself — it is this sort of vampire that hunters often encounter, as these orphans haven't been taught how to conceal themselves properly.

A human drained of blood without receiving any vampire blood simply dies. A vampire who intends to infect a human must do so immediately upon draining the victim. If the vampire waits too long, the human's soul flees the body and thereafter no amount of offered blood can animate it as a bloodsucker.

BLOOD

Vampires belong to families they call "clans." Each clan has different capabilities and weaknesses, but all are bound by one common need — blood. A vampire must feed or she becomes weak and cannot fuel her unholy powers, or indeed even animate her unliving body. In game terms, instead of using Willpower (as suggested on p. 264 of *Hunter*), vampires spend blood points to activate their powers. A vampire must also expend one blood point each evening simply to "revive" for the night. Vampires still possess Willpower, though, and may use it in the ways detailed elsewhere in the *Hunter* rules. Vampires have Willpower ratings anywhere from 4 to 10, depending on their drive or obsession.

A vampire feeds by biting a victim's skin. When a vampire bites a normal (nonimbued) human being,



WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

So, if a vampire has to be created by another vampire, what started it all? Who or what was the first vampire? Hunters have no way to know, of course, but they toss around theories.

Some of the imbued posit that vampirism is a disease, an infection that simply has yet to be identified and studied. Because hunters rarely come into contact with really old vampires, some of them don't believe that "elders" exist — that the disease runs its course, perhaps taking decades, and the victim dies ultimately.

Others assert that vampires are the spawn of Satan or some other such mythological figure, placed on Earth to do his evil bidding. And still others see vampirism as a curse, damning its victims to walk in darkness forever.

Some very curious hunters have even interrogated vampires to try to resolve this conundrum and have discovered something odd: Vampires themselves don't necessarily know. All of the theories that hunters have developed, in addition to one about all vampires being descended from Cain (as in the Biblical character who kills his brother and is cursed by God), have been offered as possibilities. The only consistent theme is that no one, neither hunter nor vampire, seems to know for sure.

the victim experiences a rush of pleasure that immobilizes him until the vampire is through feeding. Hunters who have Conviction's defenses active are immune to this rush, and even "unshielded" hunters get a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) to avoid it. A hunter who finds herself under a vampire's fangs is still in serious danger, however.

The average adult human being contains the equivalent of 10 blood points. Vampires usually drain only one point per turn, but can take up to three (usually resulting in a large wound and therefore some spilled blood). After feeding, a vampire can lick the wound, which closes it (so searching a supposed victim for telltale pinprick-sized wounds usually doesn't bear any results). Vampires do not have to kill their victims, and indeed, cautious nightcrawlers (or those rare few who attempt to keep some measure of morality) avoid doing so. The average human being needs medical attention after losing three to four points of blood, and dies if more than five are taken.

Vampires can drain blood quickly, killing an unresisting human victim in two turns if they so desire (when

possible, many of them choose to feed more slowly and take pleasure in the meal). A hunter, once bitten, feels great pain and numbness spreading from the bite location, then probably panics and tries to fight off the vampire. Wounds created by vampire fangs are small and normally don't bleed badly on their own, but once a vampire sinks her fangs in, she can intentionally bite down and rip flesh from her victim's body, inflicting Strength + 1 lethal damage. For the record, vampires can feed on each other, but doing so without consent is considered a grave crime among their kind.

A young vampire can digest only 10 blood points at a time. Older vampires can hold more, perhaps as many as 30. That means old vampires, in addition to the power that experience brings, can fight for much longer without becoming tired or drained. It also means that they don't need to feed as often as their fledglings. Elder vampires rarely come to the attention of the imbued, however, and vice versa. These monstrosities rarely deal with any humans directly — they often have proxies do their bidding for them — whereas hunters simply don't know how to look for ancient vampires. These beings are just too well integrated socially or magically into the mortal world (or distanced from it), which is probably just as well for curious imbued.

IMMORTALITY

One night, one week or even one year after a human being becomes a vampire, she still thinks and acts very much as she did before. Young vampires are still very human, ideologically. Few of them are cold-blooded killers, and many of them plead for their unlives if cornered or trapped by hunters. Indeed, there is very little difference in morality (as some Innocents are fond of pointing out) between a young vampire who hunts for prey and an imbued hunter who kills monsters to "cleanse the Earth." Both do what's in their nature, and a vampire doesn't necessarily do lasting harm.

Time inevitably gets the better of vampires, though. A leech might refuse to kill — might even feed on animals exclusively, rather than victimize humans — and hold onto that stricture for a hundred years. But when he inevitably takes a human life, the downhill slide begins. Killing a victim, whether out of necessity, passion or self-preservation, only makes it easier for the beast to do so again. Some bloodsuckers discover this pitfall early in their unlives, and some hold onto their humanity for decades. But every vampire is a predator at heart, and it's therefore only a matter of time. Unfortunately, vampires have time.

Once a rot begins looking at humans as mobile snacks, he can start to play with his food, so to speak. Some vampires accrue power and influence in mortal circles, not because they desire or even need it, but because it's a challenge and because they need something

to do from night to night. Bloodsuckers often hold positions of power and influence (although usually through agents directed from behind the scenes) because such posts allow manipulation of human affairs without hands-on involvement in them. After all, holding a job that requires true human interaction would require stooping to the level of one's food.

It's tragic, in a way: Many vampires would like to abandon humanity, but they must stay near the masses in order to feed and hide. Some vampires wallow in their tragic state and use it as an excuse for their predation. Others try to leave cities behind — some vampires do indeed lurk in rural locales — but they are few and far between. For the most part, however, vampires become comfortable. They find that patterns (arguably "ruts") — familiar feeding grounds, hired servants — slip into an "unlifestyle" and while away the years. Such is one reason why vampires don't simply leave an area when hunters begin sniffing around. They are territorial and don't like their routines disrupted.

NIGHTLY EXISTENCE

As stated above, one blood point must be spent for a vampire each night upon awakening. At that moment, the vampire's body returns to the state it was in when the vampire died. That means a rot's hair remains the same length. If a vampire wants to change her hairstyle, she must do it every night upon rising. That means re-applying hair dyes. Likewise, tattoos gained post-mortem disappear, leaving only a puddle of ink on the skin. Piercings work their way out of the body. Some vampires even have wounds that reappear every night (unfortunately for hunters, this phenomenon is very rare). A vampire viewed during the day looks dead. If it sustained wounds recently, patient hunters might be able to watch the flesh knit together slowly, reforming without so much as a scab. The creature's flesh is pale. Its eyes are sunken. "Sleeping" is not the word that comes to mind. The vampire looks like a corpse that by rights should decompose.

A vampire awakens at sundown each evening, assuming she has blood in her body (see "Vulnerabilities," below). Most vampires, especially young ones, devote much of their time to feeding. Some bloodsuckers seduce their prey, leaving targets drained and weak (and perhaps wanting more — remember the euphoric rush that feeding inspires). Others enter homes and prey on sleeping people. Some vampires — notably those too hideous to interact with the living — simply grab isolated individuals and drain their blood. If the victim dies, the vampire must discard the body somehow. Intelligent hunters watch for dumpster fires — they are sometimes a vampire's method of disposing his kills. A hunter with a medical examiner or a coroner for a Contact might be alerted to bodies that seem low on blood.

However a vampire spends her night, she had best be indoors or underground and safe come the dawn. At sunrise, vampires become torpid and sluggish. Staying awake requires a Willpower roll (difficulty 6 for young vampires, as high as 9 for old ones) each scene. A direct threat lowers this difficulty by one. If the roll fails, the vampire falls into the deathlike state in which it spends its days. Outside forces moving her body grant her another chance to wake up.

ATTACKS AND DAMAGE

Vampires' great resilience is thought to stem from their undead state. Once one is dead, some harm is just... unimpressive. The undead can soak both bashing damage (trauma from blunt objects) and lethal damage (injury from weapons that penetrate the body). They use their full Stamina ratings (and any other supernatural resilience) to soak. Any health levels lost to bashing or lethal damage are marked on a vampire's Health chart with a "/." Young vampires have as many health levels as a human. Older undead can have more. Vampires are, however, subject to wound penalties.

Even if vampires lose health levels to bashing or lethal damage, they can spend blood to heal those injuries. Vampires can recover one health level per blood point spent. It takes them one full action to do so, and they can recover no more than one level per action. Rumor holds that really old vampires can spend up to three points of blood to heal as many levels in a single action, but vampires that powerful are the stuff of legend and nightmares.

A vampire reduced to Incapacitated through bashing and lethal damage falls into a coma like that it enters when it's out of blood (see below). It may remain that way for hours, days or even months until it awakens, assuming it isn't destroyed by hunters in the meantime.

VULNERABILITIES

Vampires, as suggested in Chapter 3, aren't exactly immortal. They can be killed, if one knows how.

There are ways of hurting a bloodsucker that cannot be shrugged off so easily. Fire and sunlight are a hunter's best weapons. Damage from fire is detailed in the **Hunter** rules, on p. 208. Exposure to sunlight inflicts one to three health levels of damage per turn of exposure, depending on the intensity of the light and the degree of exposure. Both fire and sunlight are considered "aggravated" damage. Vampires cannot use Stamina to soak aggravated damage, but they can use supernatural Endurance (see p. 97) to do so at a difficulty of 8. Mark any aggravated health levels on the Health chart with an "X" and apply them as lethal damage is applied to hunters. A Health chart full of aggravated damage indicates a destroyed vampire. Undead destroyed by these means are not simply put into a comatose state, they actually "die," quickly, painfully and finally. Very

few vampires have to worry about the sun, though; they tend to fall into a deep sleep during the day, whether they want to or not, as stated above.

Health levels lost to aggravated damage are much harder for a vampire to recover than are those from bashing or lethal damage. Aggravated wounds require five blood points for every health level healed. Grievously injured vampires become extremely hungry very quickly.

Staking a vampire through the heart does not destroy it, but instead merely leaves the creature immobile (and in great pain). Staking a vampire requires a player to announce her intentions before the attack roll. The difficulty is 9, and the attacker must inflict at least three health levels of damage, after soaking. After a successful attack, the vampire is paralyzed completely. The monster is conscious and may use certain mental powers at +2 difficulty, though it may not move or perform any action that requires the expenditure of blood.

Vampires are also vulnerable to starvation. A vampire who spends all of his blood points flies into a hunger frenzy (see below). If the "empty" vampire is injured in any way, he drops into a comatose state and does not reawaken until fed fresh blood. The same thing happens to a vampire who has no blood with which to animate his body in the evening. Note that vampires can enter this state at will. If they do so, they do not lose blood points daily and can remain comatose for as long as they wish. A bloodsucker, especially an old one, confronted with an annoying and dangerous enemy may well decide simply to outlive him, drop into a deep sleep and awaken 50 years later. Some particularly insidious vampires send a note to their foes threatening to show up years later to menace those enemies' children or grandchildren....

An asset at some times, a vulnerability at others, all vampires can and do enter horrible fits of rage called frenzy. A vampire in frenzy feels no pain (and therefore takes no wound penalties), and she attacks and feeds from anything in sight. When the frenzy is over, awareness of pain resumes and wound penalties are imposed again. While in a frenzy, vampires are also hard to affect with certain mental edges. The difficulties of affecting a vampire with edges such as Burden, Confront, Insinuate and Bluster increase by two. Vampires enter frenzy out of hunger, as stated above. The rage persists one turn for each blood point that a vampire is missing from its maximum possible total. Thus, a vampire that could possess 10 blood points, but that currently has only three, frenzies for seven turns. Some vampires fly into frenzy when attacked (or simply provoked). Also, a rot may frenzy when confronted with fire or sunlight (in this case, however, the frenzy is driven by fear and the vampire does its best to get away, attacking only if impeded). A vampire can resist frenzy by the expenditure of a Willpower point, but repeated provocation

requires repeated payment. Resisting hunger-induced frenzy requires spending Willpower each turn.

Although there may be a few bloodsuckers who have issues with the "classic" vampire banes — garlic, running water or the thorns of a hawthorn tree — they're in a serious minority. Hunters who rely on those old tales don't last long.

There is some validity to the theory that crosses and other religious icons scare vampires away, but results have been mixed enough that most hunters would be foolish to rely upon it. Many of the hunters who claim to have used crosses successfully actually possess the Defender edge Ward, and they trigger it through a religious symbol. Thus, the power works on all kinds of supernaturals, not just vampires.

BLOOD SLAVES

A human being who drinks vampire blood without first being drained himself becomes a ghoul (hunters call such people blood slaves, bruises, toadies, ass kissers and puppets, among many other names). While not immortal, ghouls are by no means powerless. They are stronger than normal people (consider a ghoul to have one automatic success on any Strength roll, including Melee and Brawl damage rolls). Like vampires, they can spend blood points to heal bashing or lethal wounds, though a ghoul's body holds no more than three blood points. Some ghouls also display the increased speed and endurance of their vampiric masters — a rare few even display some of the other "common" vampire powers such as Charm and Unseen. Furthermore, ghouls do not age as long as they have vampire blood in their bodies. Like the undead, they "burn" blood points to maintain their quasi-human state, but much more slowly than their masters do: A ghoul loses one blood point each month.

Three drinks of vampire blood on three separate nights not only turns a person into a ghoul, but binds the ghoul's will to the vampire's. The ghoul follows his master's orders without question and obeys out of love and loyalty (which makes for a much more fanatic minion than money ever can). This loyalty is a tool that informed hunters can use against vampires, however: A threat against the vampire may cause a ghoul to let down his guard or act rashly.

Blood slaves can frenzy just as vampires can. Although ghouls usually have an easier time keeping their rage under control, they check for frenzy more often. Any threat to a ghoul's master (or to the ghoul himself) or extreme stress of any kind may set off a bruise. Even though a blood slave doesn't have the massive strength or varied skills of a vampire, a sudden rage can often surprise a group of hunters, especially if they consider a ghoul "mostly human." When you feel a ghoul may frenzy, roll the ghoul's Willpower (difficulty 4, or 7

depending on the magnitude of the stimulus). If the roll succeeds, he maintains control. Otherwise, he attacks anyone within reach for (10 minus Willpower) turns.

Ghouls can become "free" if the vampire they serve is destroyed. This event by itself does not cleanse a blood slave's taint, however. It merely frees her from the yoke of slavery. A ghoulish without a master still retains augmented strength and other powers so long as she has supernatural blood in her body. When a ghoulish loses her last blood point, she has only a month to find more. Otherwise, she loses all supernatural powers and benefits, including her borrowed resistance to aging. A century-old ghoulish who suddenly finds herself without a ready supply of vampire blood certainly dies unless she finds a new master — or takes what she needs for herself.

Puppets' need for blood offers some interesting possibilities for hunter/ghoulish interaction. A bruise who is not a slave to a vampire could be a potential ally. Maybe he can help their cause in return for "access" to the creatures they defeat. Does the ghoulish have information that the hunters might use? Do the hunters have ethical issues with working alongside a bruise? Is there a way to wean the ghoulish from his addiction slowly, without the consequences of sudden withdrawal?

Note that even old ghoulish are rarely told much about vampire society. A ghoulish is exposed to only as much as she needs to know. Sometimes, she doesn't even know the source of her newfound strength. Ones who do know that they serve vampires typically know little else, and nightcrawlers often lie to their slaves. Some puppets believe their master has walked the Earth for millennia, when in fact they serve a vampire who was still breathing a scant decade ago. Others are told that vampires have no society at all — or, conversely, that vampiric society pervades every aspect of human society, influencing even world leaders. A very common lie is that the master grooms a ghoulish for induction into the ranks of the undead "some night" — but this isn't *always* a lie.

Some vampires feed their blood to animals. A "ghouled" animal is bound to the vampire just as a human being would be, and gains the same benefits of healing, longevity and strength. The animal becomes possessed of a vicious bloodlust, however, even if the beast in question is usually a docile species. Ghouled animals attack anyone who threatens their master, with or without command. Such beasts look "wrong" under second sight and are affected by edges such as Ward and Hide.

Animals and people who have come under the control of vampires by drinking their blood seem tainted to hunters' second sight. Edges such as Discern, Illuminate and Witness must be used to see that the taint courses through blood slaves' very veins.

SAMPLE GHOULS

Below are two blood slaves to use as starting points or in a pinch. Remember that while blood slaves may be lowly servants among vampires, they are powerful and capable supernatural creatures in comparison to humans. Played intelligently, they can be more than a match for a group of hunters.

THE BODYGUARD

"Keep your distance, jack."

Prelude: Jim Peters was a lost cause. He had a degree, yeah, but not in anything useful. Besides, his arrest record prevented him from getting anything more than shit work. He'd burned every bridge he had ever crossed, and after his mother died he had nowhere to turn.

He wound up working as a bouncer in a seedy downtown bar. He'd always been large and had boxed for years just to stay in shape. It brought him decent money, but he was truly annoyed that his schooling had led him to this pass.

One night, he was sitting outside the bar during a break, reading a book that none of the patrons could have comprehended. A well-dressed man approached and asked for directions, and they struck up a conversation. That discussion ended with the man — "Mr. O'Brien" — hiring Jim as a bodyguard. Jim was just what he needed, O'Brien said — someone skilled in combat but with a brain; perceptive, quick-witted and smart.

Jim had worked for O'Brien for nearly eight months when some psycho shot an arrow at his boss. An *arrow*, for God's sake! Jim shoved O'Brien out of the way and wound up with the thing sticking out of his shoulder. That night, O'Brien shared a secret with Jim, and then offered him a promotion. Jim accepted and now serves his boss even more capably than before, and with just as much loyalty.



Concept: Looks can be deceiving. This guy may appear big and dumb, but he's well spoken, smart and loyal to his boss to the end.

Roleplaying Hints: Stick close to your boss. If someone approaches him in any threatening manner, put a pistol to the asshole's temple or a hand around his throat before he gets within six feet. You're prepared to give your life if necessary, but you weren't hired to hang yourself. Your job is to make sure that O'Brien and you stay safe. If you die, who'll take care of your boss?

Equipment: Pistol, backup pistol, sap, cash, cellphone, comfortable clothes, Jeep with shotgun in the back seat

Attributes: Strength (Bruiser) 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits (Quick) 4

Abilities: Academics (Philosophy) 2, Alertness (Threats) 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Computer 1, Dodge 3, Drive 3, Empathy 2, Etiquette 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 3, Investigation 1, Melee 2, Security 3, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 1

Backgrounds: Resources 3

Powers: Power 1, Speed 1, Endurance 1

Willpower: 6

Blood: 3

THE CARETAKER

"Sorry, this section's closed to the public. Come back tomorrow."

From childhood, Eugene Smith always earned the description "morbid." As a youngster, his first question upon getting a pet was how long it might live. He was always intensely curious around the elderly — they might die at any moment! It wasn't that Eugene was obsessed with death. He just wanted to be prepared.

Eugene decided that he wanted to be a mortician, to dress up and beautify death for people. He laughed at others who feared death — it was natural, inevitable. What was there to be afraid of?

Eugene's plans were disrupted by the draft, however. He served his time in the military, fought in Vietnam, and returned knowing more about death than even he had ever wished. He took a job in a cemetery as a groundskeeper and tried to stay away from people. People, after all, were temporary. He had no desire to see them pass. His fascination with death was long gone.

And then Death visited him.

Death walked in the shape of a man and wished for Eugene to be its servant and caretaker. Death — under the unassuming name of "Gideon" — wished to vanish into other worlds by day and return by night. Eugene's job was to see that it wasn't disturbed. In return, Gideon gave Eugene a kiss and freed him from having to fear passing. As long as Eugene served faithfully, Gideon would leave Eugene alone, unchanging and undying.



Concept: Never quite all there to begin with, the Caretaker has become even more disconnected from reality since becoming a ghoul. He believes that he serves Death in exchange for immortality, and either he doesn't know or he willfully ignores the fact that his master is dead.

Roleplaying Hints: You haven't felt this strong in 20 years. You haven't grown younger — that's beyond Death's power, you know — but you haven't aged or felt sick since Death took you. You'll continue to serve Death, but if something were to threaten Death directly, your faith and loyalty would be seriously shaken.

Equipment: Keys, shovel, gardening tools, small car

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 1, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Academics (Religious Studies) 1, Alertness 1, Awareness 2, Brawl 1, Drive 2, Empathy 2, Firearms 1, Intuition 2, Occult 1, Security 2, Stealth 3, Survival 1

Backgrounds: Resources 2

Powers: Power 1, Unseen

Willpower: 3

Blood: 2

ANIMAL GHOULS

Because the vast majority of vampires reside in cities, the bloodthirsty animals they keep as servants are usually creatures that go unnoticed in the urban sprawl. Although it wouldn't be impossible for a vampire to feed its blood to a lion or eagle, owning such animals makes the rot that much more traceable and visible — and both of these qualities are abhorrent to bloodsuckers.

The Traits listed below are for normal animals. An animal that has been fed vampire blood also receives Power 1 and either Endurance 1 or Speed 1 (possibly both for old ghouls). As mentioned in the *Storytellers Companion*, some vampires have the ability to summon and communicate with animals. Ghoul animals are slightly more intelligent than their kind are normally, are always loyal and can undertake more complex tasks than their mundane counterparts. Vampires use animals as spies, messengers and bodyguards, to name a few possibilities.

CAT

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Awareness 3 (Storyteller's option: Cats are reputed to be able to sense ghosts and other "presences."), Athletics 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Climbing 3, Stealth 4

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, -1, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Claw or bite for 1 die

DOG

The Traits below represent a big dog such as a mastiff. Smaller dogs aren't as intimidating or as strong, but can still be made into ghouls and can serve as surprisingly effective guardians.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for 5 dice, claw for 2

RAY

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Stealth 3

Willpower: 4

Health Levels: OK, -1, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for 1 die

VAMPIRE POWERS

The *Hunter Storytellers Companion* lists many of the powers a vampire is likely to have. Presented here are more fiendish capabilities with which you can plague the imbued. Remember that a "young" vampire is likely to have only one uncommon power... whereas his unholy sire might have several, and even one or two rare powers.

COMMON POWERS

AURA SIGHT

A common but subtle power, Aura Sight allows a vampire to concentrate on a subject and know the target's relative emotional state. This power also allows a vampire to identify a hunter — provided she knows what she's

looking for. While not as impressive as the capacity to grow claws or outrun a car, this power aids vampires immensely in feeding and in nightly survival. A crowd that suddenly turns angry means trouble is brewing. Recognizing that trouble before it's too late can be crucial to seeing another night. Alternatively, a mortal who becomes anxious or excited at the sight of the vampire might be a good choice for feeding — or might be a hunter trying to lure the bloodsucker into a trap.

System: Spend one blood point and roll Perception + Awareness (difficulty 7). Each success grants the vampire a deeper understanding of a target's emotional state. The target has no idea that this scrutiny takes place. The same sense can be applied to detect hunters' emotions, and such subjects seem like ordinary people. On a roll of 9 or more, however, a vampire detects a strange golden aura around a hunter (see "The Undead Perspective," below). Aura Sight can be used as an extended action, with accumulated successes granting more information, but each roll costs another blood point (it is therefore not possible to activate the power and scan a room; it works on one person at a time).

JUST FOR THE RECORD

Hunters cannot become vampires. Ever. Attempting to change one of the imbued into a vampire simply kills the hapless hunter (better death than eternity as an abomination, anyway). There are no exceptions.

Likewise, drinking vampire blood has no affect on the imbued. They do not gain any of the benefits of ghouldom, and no matter how much vampire blood they drink, willingly or otherwise, they never become bound to serve a vampiric master.

The reverse is also true: A ghoul cannot become imbued. If a person has ever, at any time, been bound to a vampire, that person is forever without the possibility of being chosen by the Messengers.

Of course, because the imbuing doesn't come with a handbook, very few hunters *know* that they cannot become vampires or ghouls. A hunter who is forced to imbibe vampire blood might be watched very closely by her compatriots for signs of betrayal. Worse, if a hunter is captured by a rot, the question might arise of whether she could be raised as an undead creature. Her fellows might have to put her down, too, or she might tell her captors everything about the imbued. The fear of becoming a vampire — indeed, of becoming any sort of monster — should be a strongly motivating force among hunters. A vampire who attempts to make a willing slave from one of the chosen certainly fails — but neither vampires nor hunters know that in advance.

UNCOMMON POWERS

ACID TOUCH

The vampire secretes a foul substance that burns through wood, metal and flesh. A simple touch can cause agony and searing wounds. Prolonged contact can kill. A vampire can render a hunter's arsenal useless by corroding triggers and decaying stakes. Legends from the Middle East suggest creatures that can spit a similar substance, but these rumors remain unsubstantiated.

System: Spend one blood point to activate this power and one per turn to maintain it in combat. The vampire's unarmed combat damage becomes lethal (and therefore unsoakable to hunters). Even a simple touch inflicts lethal unarmed combat damage. Prolonged contact inflicts this damage each turn, automatically. If used against inanimate objects, one blood point is enough to burn through a quarter-inch of steel or three inches of wood.

ANIMATE SHADOWS

The vampire can call forth tentacles from any nearby shadow. These horrors can grapple or strangle a target or simply hold her in place for the vampire's pleasure. The tentacles are strong but are vulnerable to fire, just like their creator. Unfortunately, they share her resistance to more mundane forms of harm and appear to act of their own will — vampires can fight normally while tentacles act.

System: Spend one blood point for each tentacle created. Each tentacle is six feet long (the vampire may double this length by spending an additional blood point per appendage), and each has Strength and Dexterity ratings equal to the vampire's. The limbs soak bashing and lethal damage with the same dice pool as their creator, although they may not soak damage from fire or sunlight, regardless of any possible capacity for the vampire to do so. Each tentacle has four health levels. Tentacles

POWER, SPEED AND ENDURANCE

The most common supernatural capabilities augment vampires (and ghouls) physically. Most vampires have at least one or two points of an enhanced physical capability, and some may have many more. Even a young vampire can have as many as five points in heightened physical capabilities, whereas a very old one could potentially have 10, making her exceedingly deadly and nigh indestructible.

POWER

Some vampires have such remarkable strength that they can perform feats to make mortals tremble. Vampires can leap vast distances to pounce on a victim or punch through concrete walls to get at prey. A blow from a powerful vampire can cripple or kill a hunter.

System: When the vampire performs a feat of Strength, roll whatever dice pool is appropriate and add dots of supernatural power as automatic successes. In melee or brawling, these automatic successes are applied to the damage roll. This power does not require the expenditure of blood; it is inherent to a vampire's nature.

SPEED

Vampires are predators and speed is one of their most effective weapons. A fleet vampire can cover an unbelievable amount of ground or perform multiple feats almost simultaneously. A young vampire could overwhelm a single hunter, whereas an old one could take on a group of antagonists.

System: For each point of supernatural speed a vampire possesses, it can perform an additional action in a turn. Each extra action must be dedicated to one feat only, to attack or run, for example. Multiple feats — activating a power *and* firing a gun — cannot be performed with each action. A vampire using this capability is a blur to hunter eyes.

One blood point must be spent for each turn in which extra actions are gained. Although some hunters facing terrifyingly swift vampires have endured long enough to see their enemy weaken from lack of blood, most hunters who gamble on this strategy never see another sunrise.

ENDURANCE

It's bad enough that all vampires are able to laugh off damage that would cripple humans, and that they're able to use the blood of their victims to heal wounds before a hunter's eyes. It's even worse that certain bloodsuckers are virtually invulnerable. Some of them can withstand even fire and sunlight.

System: Mortals and most vampires are able to soak damage with their Stamina only. For each point of supernatural endurance a vampire possesses, it gains an additional die with which to soak bashing and lethal damage. Vampires with such mettle can also soak aggravated damage (from fire and sunlight) with a dice pool equal to their dots in supernatural endurance. Thus, a vampire with Stamina 4 and Endurance 3 has seven dice with which to soak bashing and lethal damage, and three dice with which to soak damage from fire and exposure to sunlight. This benefit does not require the expenditure of blood.

exist for one scene or until destroyed, although the vampire can dispel them whenever she chooses.

HELLFIRE

Some hunters believe (correctly) that vampires fear fire. And yet, a few bloodsuckers can summon fire as if from nowhere. Some don't appear to be able to conjure much more than a candle flame whereas others can turn a room into a raging inferno with a gesture. A hunter has no easy way to discern a vampire's mastery of Hellfire. Imbued who invade a vampire's sanctum with the intent to burn their target to ashes may discover that fire does not play favorites.

System: Spend two blood points and roll Willpower. The difficulty depends upon how large a fire the vampire wishes to create. The equivalent of a match flame is difficulty 5, whereas a fire intense enough to cause damage is at least difficulty 7. The vampire can "hold" a small fire in his hands for intimidation's sake without taking damage. Once the fire is released, not even the vampire who summoned it can control it (or is immune to it). See *Hunter*, p. 208, for the damage that fire can cause. A vampire with this power can spark a fire anywhere in his line of sight.

SNAKE TONGUE

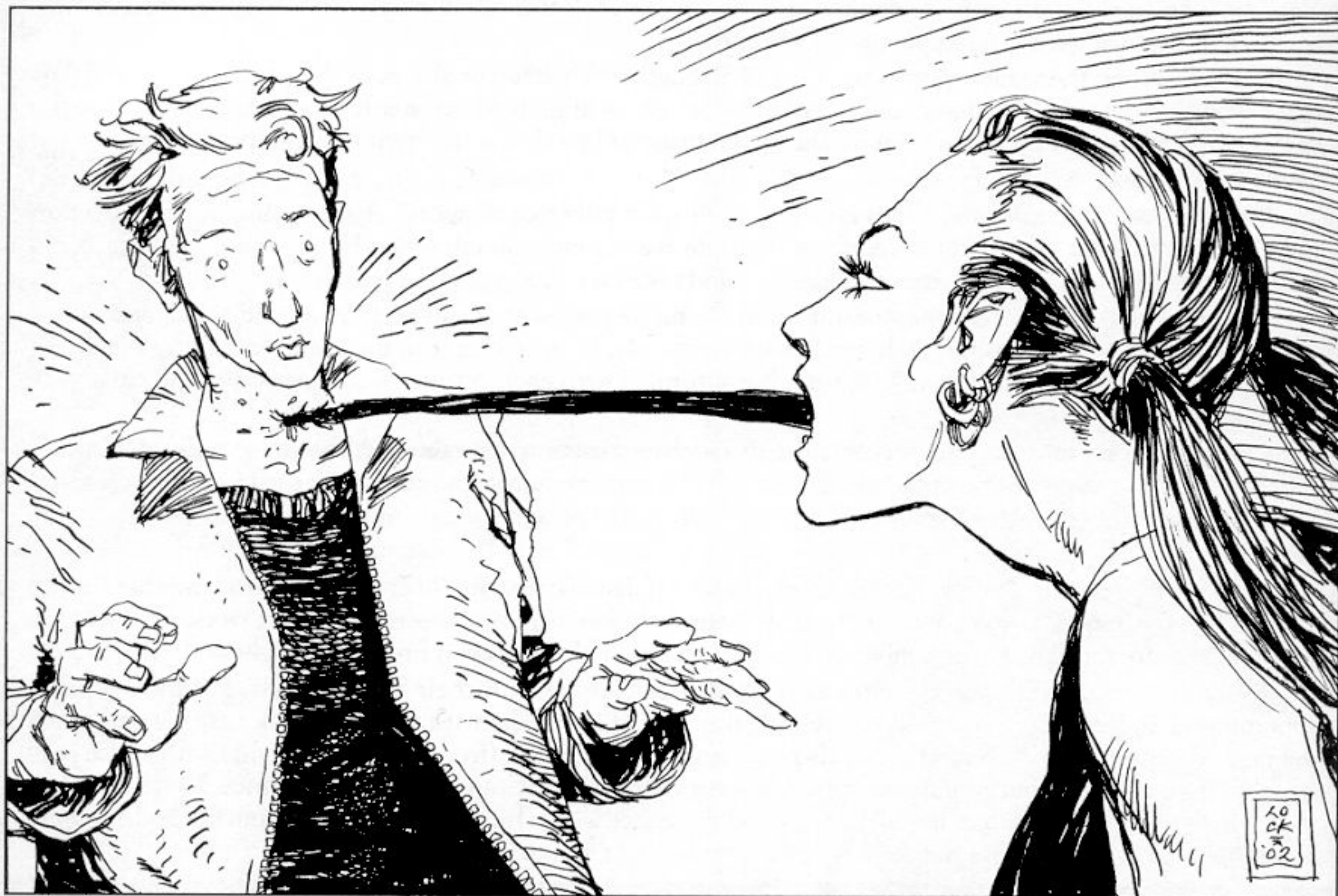
Among the more bizarre and grotesque powers a bloodsucker can possess, this capability allows a leech to elongate her tongue to nearly two feet in length, and

flick it like a frog's to strike a target. The tongue is barbed — literally — and can puncture a target's skin, thus allowing the vampire to feed at a distance. Even this horrific method of feeding induces the rush of pleasure common to vampire bites.

System: Spend two blood points. Attacking with the tongue requires a successful Dexterity + Brawl roll (difficulty 6). The tongue inflicts the vampire's Strength in lethal damage. If the vampire inflicts any damage, she may feed on the target normally. Grabbing the extended tongue requires overcoming some revulsion and then rolling Dexterity + Brawl (difficulty of the vampire's Wits + Alertness or 7, whichever is higher). Grabbing the tongue is a risky proposition, however — a successful attack from the vampire in a subsequent action means that the hunter's hand or arm is impaled by barbs along its shaft, even while the tongue otherwise impales and draws blood from another target. Attacking an extended tongue with a melee or firearms attack requires a successful targeting action (*Hunter*, p. 192).

TELEKINESIS

Poltergeists aren't the only monsters with this frightening capability. A skilled vampire can "call" objects from across a room, open or shut doors, fly or even lift a human being off his feet. Some vampires seem more skilled with this power than others, but applied cre-



atively, it is among the most frightening and deadly capacities a monster can possess.

System: Spend two blood points and roll Willpower. The vampire can manipulate any object within line of sight. The difficulty varies based on how much weight the vampire wishes to manipulate and how much control or force she exerts (6 for a light or small object, or for something that is moved slowly; as much as 9 for a heavy or bulky item, or one that flies across a room with amazing speed and force). Applying enough force to do damage requires considerable control and should be considered a rare power rather than uncommon (use of it costs three blood points). Even a "novice" can cause a gun to cock and fire, however.

If a vampire hurls objects at a hunter to cause damage, the target may get a resisted Dodge roll if he can perform that action in the turn. Each of the creature's Willpower successes inflicts two levels of bashing or lethal damage, whichever is appropriate.

A vampire can manipulate an object (or objects) for as many turns as successes are achieved in your initial Willpower roll.

WARP

A team of hunters facing a vampire with this power is in for quite a shock, especially if the imbued rely on wooden stakes! The vampire can warp and gnarl any wooden objects he can see, causing points to dull or stakes to curl back on themselves. The wooden stocks of rifles and shotguns are also fair game; the vampire can cause them to swell in such a manner as to render the guns useless.

But destroying a hunter's weapons is not the only use for this power. Consider the possibilities of warping floorboards or support beams above or below the chosen.

System: The vampire may warp up to 50 pounds of wood per blood point spent. The vampire can twist it into any shape he desires. The wood remains warped, permanently.

RARE POWERS

DEMON FORM

Some hunters believe that vampires are simply demons in human bodies; those (thankfully) rare bloodsuckers with this power seem to prove such assertions true. The vampire can change into a horrific, insectlike beast out of H. R. Giger's worst nightmares. Although hunters are accustomed to seeing horrible sights, a vampire in demon form often sends the bravest of the imbued running for safety and sanity. Few succeed in finding either.

System: Spend three blood points. The exact features of the "demon" vary, but you're encouraged to use your imagination to the most gruesome extremes. The vampire's Physical Attributes all increase

by three points (although Social Attributes drop to zero), and all unarmed combat damage increases by one die. The vampire may remain in this form as long as he chooses. Humans who see the demon form run in fear and afterward repress the encounter altogether. Hunters with active Conviction can steel themselves to the sight and deal with the creature. Hunters without Conviction active when confronted by a "demon" behave as normal people do. You may allow "reactive" use of Conviction (*Hunter*, p. 133) when one of the imbued is about to face a vampire in demon form. Alternatively, you may allow Conviction to be spent for a hunter only after he has spent several turns fleeing from the vicinity of a demon or gaping uselessly at the creature (after which, the character may behave normally).

SHADOW FORM

Why folklore reports vampires that can change into mist but not those that can become one with shadow is a mystery. Some bloodsuckers can apparently do exactly that. A leech in shadow form is vulnerable to fire and sunlight as usual, but takes no damage whatsoever from physical assaults (including ones augmented by Cleave). The vampire may ooze up walls or across ceilings, slither through cracks, and see in complete darkness.

System: Spend three blood points. The transformation persists for as long as the vampire wishes. While in shadow form, the creature is not only vulnerable to fire and sunlight but a successful Willpower roll (difficulty 9) must be made to keep from fleeing if confronted with either of these weapons (fleeing, in this form, is fairly simple of course). The vampire can use mental powers including Charm, Terrify, Command and Haunt the Mind normally, but cannot use ones that require physical contact. She can likewise be affected by edges that affect her mind, emotions or senses as long as physical contact isn't necessary.

WARP BONE

This disgusting power allows a vampire to reshape bone as she sees fit — her own or another's. She may grow bony claws for herself, or immobilize a target with a brief touch. Some vampires find it amusing to warp a hunter's bones beyond repair but leave the individual alive, forever crippled.

System: Spend three blood points. The vampire can use this power to elongate the bones of her fingers into claws (as the common power of the same name). If used to twist a target's skeleton, roll Dexterity + Crafts (difficulty 6). The power inflicts Strength + 2 lethal damage as bones twist and puncture flesh. If the vampire wishes to rearrange bones but leave flesh intact, roll Dexterity + Crafts (difficulty varies from 7 to 9, based on how challenging the alteration is and



whether the target is willing; unwilling targets probably squirm and try to escape, thus making subtle manipulation harder). The vampire must touch the target to use any form of this power. Active Conviction offers no protection against Warp Bone.

Damage done can be healed through extensive medical treatment and therapy reflected through the normal healing process for recovering from lethal damage, although you may rule that some health levels may never be fully restored after an individual is subjected to this power. The victim's bones can never quite be returned to normal, perhaps imposing a movement, Dexterity or Social Attribute penalty.

PORTRAYING VAMPIRES

In legend and film, vampires have been portrayed as everything from seducers to manipulators to mindless beasts. So how best to portray them in *Hunter*? All of these approaches, and several more, are appropriate.

The following are some themes and ideas to keep in mind when using vampires as antagonists in your *Hunter* game. Most work well regardless of whether you choose to follow World of Darkness canon with respect to vampires or you decide to develop your own society (or lack thereof) for bloodsuckers (see "Variant Vampires," below).

HORROR

If monster legends evolve from our fears, it's easy to see where vampires came from. The notion of drinking blood in order to gain strength has been asserted by nearly every culture on Earth, so a logical — if horrific — next step is a creature that steals blood (and therefore strength) from the living. That a corpse could return from the grave to do so puts an even more terrifying twist on the idea, especially if that corpse once belonged to someone who was familiar. A friend, loved one or member of the community back from the dead as a blood-drinking monster — the idea has lurked in our nightmares for centuries.

HUMANITY?

Vampires of legend were monsters. They were unequivocally evil. Demons on earth. They stole blood from the living and bore no resemblance to people, assuming they even *were* people once. But somewhere along the way, vampires became more human. Blame it on films such as *Lost Boys* or books including *Interview with the Vampire*. Perhaps the notion that some part of the human soul lingers on in the vampire's unliving body goes back further to *Carmilla* or *Dracula*. Wherever the idea arose, the vampire that retains a human mind, let alone human morality or a soul, is a far cry from the obviously monstrous *vrykolakes* from Greece or the

ekimmu from Babylon. Those creatures — though descended from human beings — were distorted and grotesque — obviously *inhuman*. But the “evil incarnate” is black and white no longer, for if these creatures look human and act human (most of the time), might some part of them still be human?

You can handle this dichotomy in a number of ways.

Vampires are irredeemably evil. Perhaps vampires truly are absolute monsters. None of this moaning about tortured souls. *They have no souls*. If some remnant of the person that a vampire once was still lingers, the kindest thing to do is to destroy the creature and set free the soul. When the Messengers speak, they might say, “DESTROY THE ABOMINATION” or “END THE DARKNESS.” Nothing very ambiguous there. A Redeemer trying to save a vampire meets with failure and betrayal. Vampires in this milieu sell each other out any chance they get, or should work together with single-minded devotion to evil. This approach, while good for setting a bleak, very desperate tone in *Hunter*, is also rather straightforward.

Vampires are tortured and deserve salvation. Another option is to play up the “vampires-as-former-humans” angle (see “Monsters Versus True Monsters,” below). In this scenario, vampires drink blood only when hunger drives them to madness. A vampire can still feel exactly as he did while alive and human, and his morality is still intact. There may even be a way to “cure” the condition. Perhaps a vampire has heard some legends, but he has no way to verify them. The Messengers here might advise the imbued to “END ITS SUFFERING” or “SAVE ITS SOUL.” While this humanitarian approach has its storytelling merits — notably the conflict between the drive to protect humanity from monsters and to help monsters reclaim their humanity — it also has the disadvantage of painting vampires as whiny milquetoasts rather than as unholy creatures of the night.

Vampires are diverse, just like mortals. Perhaps a merger of vampire portrayals is best for your chronicle. When the characters hunt vampires, keep in mind that a nightcrawler, like a living person, is capable of acts of kindness for no apparent reason. Vampires — especially young ones — sometimes do a “good deed for the night” that in their minds offsets the attacks they must perform. Witnessing such a good deed may well lead a group of hunters to believe that *this* vampire is not a threat and therefore not worth the trouble of destroying. But when that same vampire casually snaps a victim’s neck three nights later to prevent her from screaming, the characters have to face two unpleasant truths: They were wrong, and their mistake has cost a life.

Vampires are predators. Predators are unpredictable, but in general act based on self-preservation. A

vampire who behaves with any humanity does so because it suits him (he needs to put in public appearances, for example) or, more rarely, because some small bit of the human condition lives on within him. And that, of course, is the heart of the horror that bloodsuckers inspire. A hunter facing a vampire should never know exactly how much of the leech’s former life and identity remains. Indeed, what if the vampire was someone whom a hunter once knew? Lupe Droin, a.k.a. Cabbie22, faces a vampire she once knew in *Hunter Book: Defender* and is very nearly seduced by him, not because of the creature’s supernatural charm but because he knows her and knows how to push her buttons. Does the vampiric condition destroy humanity, deaden it or replace it? Hunters have no way of knowing, and there may be no answer. Sparing such a being may mean sparing a remorseless killer, whereas destroying it may mean killing what is akin to the best in a hunter himself.

THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE

Vampires drink blood. As vampires appear in more TV shows and films, this oh-so-basic aspect of what they are is downplayed. But imagine that you’re a hunter on the trail of a monster of some kind. Suddenly, something grabs you from behind, pulls you into a dark corner, pins your arms behind your back with shocking strength and sinks its teeth into your neck. You feel a moment of pain as the fangs pierce your skin, and then you feel your flesh grow cold. You lose feeling in your hands. You become light-headed, and your struggles grow weak. You see spots, and you realize that not only is this *thing* holding you immobile, it’s holding you up so you don’t fall. Just before you black out, you feel a trickle run down your collarbone and you realize *it’s drinking your blood*.

Never downplay the horror of what all vampires do to survive. No matter how human they appear, no matter what strange powers they might possess, their diet is the same. Hunters — and players — might need to be reminded of just how horrible that fact is. A vampire might appear very polished and genteel but have horrible, rust-smelling breath or red-tinged teeth. The prologue to this book depicts a hunter who realizes that he’s being sized up as a meal. As humans, the prospect of being eaten is terrifying to us (which is why sharks and other large predators frighten and amaze us so). The prospect of a human (or human-looking) being doing the eating adds another sickening layer to that fear. Don’t dismiss that horror out of familiarity with vampires.

DISBELIEF

Imagine that hunters discover a vampire residing in their city. Through a little investigation, they learn that its home has changed hands several times since the house was built nearly 70 years ago. Each owner did

some work to improve the place, but each seemed to pick up exactly where the previous owner left off.

The characters might well feel elated at first — they've found a chink in the vampire's armor. Obviously he loves his house. But consider the implications. The vampire has been in the city for *at least* 70 years. He might appear to be middle-aged, yet he's actually been around for more than a century. So, how does he avoid notice? Why don't people question the fact that the homeowner never seems to age? What kind of power does he possess to maintain his charade? It seems rather improbable, after all. Could the whole thing be a coincidence?

One problem that vampires present for hunters is that no one *really* believes in them. When a house is reputed to be haunted, a group of hunters can sometimes get by simply by telling the truth. The public doesn't necessarily believe in ghosts, either, but it's much more willing to allow someone to look for a ghost (especially if said ghost-hunter looks good on television) than to allow a group of stake-wielding maniacs to run around the neighborhood in search of a vampire.

Verifying a vampire's unholy condition is also next to impossible. It has a reflection, its heart beats (under scrutiny, anyway), and it can even bring a flush to its cheeks. Sunshine remains a problem, but a resourceful vampire can arrange for a doctor to swear that the "so-called bloodsucker" simply suffers from a rare condition that causes his skin to blister in direct daylight.

Many hunters either anticipate or quickly learn the folly of trying to awaken the world to the truth of the undead. Because vampires may extend their manipulative grasp to so many human endeavors — including the police, hospitals, politics and big business — saying the word "vampire" to the wrong person might result in scrutiny (at best). Because no one believes in vampires, discussing them in polite society might alert the creatures to the fact that someone who should be ignorant knows far too much. Vampires have not survived so long by taking chances needlessly.

UNPREDICTABILITY

Ask three hunters about their experiences with vampires and you might get six different answers. Some rots seem terrified of dying, afraid of some punishment in the afterlife. Some become calm before the stake is driven home. Many vampires seem to operate with the same mental faculties as any mortal, yet some are ravenous, uncontrollable beasts.

When using vampires in *Hunter*, listen to what your players (and their characters) expect. Sometimes, it's useful to meet their expectations, especially when leading them to the climax of a story (in which everything they've learned gives them a chance at victory over a potent nightcrawler). But playing against type

can be just as effective. Suppose the characters have researched "modern" vampire legends and have heard stories (perhaps on hunter-net) of refined, sophisticated creatures that strike through mundane means — only to confront their foe and have it explode into a fanged rage. Edges such as Discern may help to identify vampires, but they don't usually tell hunters anything about how the undead might behave, or about the powers or strategies that the creatures may use. You can turn that blind spot into an unexpected twist in the characters' pursuit of a nocturnal antagonist.

SOCIETY

Vampires have a society — several, in fact. The imbued probably never know the intricacies of it all given the veil of secrecy and the prohibitions by which rots police each other. And even if a few imbued do get inside information about bloodsuckers and their affairs, the information is always partial and misleading. A group of hunters in Detroit may report completely different social circles, alliances and attitudes among leeches than does a group in Atlanta. And yet, *you* should know at least the basic truths.

Without going in depth into the specific factions and sects that comprise the undead (you're referred to *Vampire: The Masquerade* if you want to do that), the various "castes" in vampire society are best observed in comparison and contrast to each other. Below are the three biggest such dichotomies: between old and young vampires, between those who wish to blend in with humans and those who wish to exploit them, and between the powerful and the beleaguered.

ELDERS VERSUS INITIATES

A vampire with less than one century of unlife under its belt is considered "young." These creatures tend to have the advantage of knowing contemporary society much better than their older compatriots (although trends change very quickly in modern nights, meaning that the age gap between two young vampires can still indicate vast cultural differences). This awareness includes not only cultural and societal trends but technological ones. A rot who has stalked the night since before the American Revolution might well be suspicious and even fearful of the Internet, but younger bloodsuckers can be just as comfortable online as many hunters are.

An important factor to keep in mind regarding the "generation gap" is that vampires do not die. If a young vampire covets an older one's power or station, the only way to get it is to remove the older creature (or to convince him to give up his seat, which is difficult — vampires enjoy their routine, as has been established). A group of hunters that contacts a young rot who claims he wants to end his existence — but cannot do so in good conscience while his unholy liege still exists — might

very well become the next “unholy liege” if the chosen help him. Of course, he’ll need to deal with those imbued afterward so that his own underlings don’t pull the same trick....

Despite being somewhat out of touch with the modern world, elder vampires hold most of the cards. Their age indicates a great degree of will and cunning — weak or stupid vampires don’t survive for centuries. Elders often possess great resources, both monetary and otherwise, that they’ve spent decades amassing. Such control and influence means that many elders are familiar (or employ people who are familiar) with the intricacies of law, politics, religion and/or business, and they often have solid ground to stand on as a result.

Vampire society is also based upon favors. A service one bloodsucker performs for another is not (usually) repaid with money, but by a “boon” to be repaid at some time in the future. What this system means for hunters is that even though the vampire they stalk may not be well-connected, she may be able to call in favors to make the hunters’ lives very difficult. Elders, by virtue of having existed longer than initiates, tend to have more favors at their disposal and can call them in if meddling humans become too bothersome.

An obvious consideration between young and old vampires is sheer supernatural power. Old ones have much more, but that’s not the crux of the difference. Young ones are much more likely to resort to using their powers than elders are, for two reasons. First, initiates haven’t been around long enough to cultivate the blend of fearsomeness and respect for secrecy that elders have. Second, elders don’t often use their unholy gifts because *they don’t need to* (see “Vampire Tactics,” below). Consider this difference to be like that between brute strength versus finesse. Why manifest superhuman strength in public to attack a hunter when you can have bodyguards intervene or you can do even more, prolonged damage to a hunter through his bank accounts?

HAVES VERSUS HAVE-NOTS

This relationship exists even among the damned. Some vampires — typically powerful elders and their progeny — influence considerable human resources. Young bloodsuckers, including those “orphans” mentioned previously, often resent that they are not allowed a chance at power. And, just as in human society, there are those who chafe at any kind of authority. They thumb their noses at those in control and break rules just to get a reaction.

In many ways, this rift mirrors that of elders and initiates. A “rebel” vampire can be of any age, however. Sometimes, even elders get the short end of the proverbial stick and wish to bring down their more influential peers. And sometimes, even young

THE RULES

Vampires made rules for themselves centuries ago. Although the different factions may argue or even fight over them at times, the laws remain more or less consistent. Some involve hospitality to other undead. Those rules aren’t really important from a **Hunter** perspective, though. The ones involving relations with mortals are, however, and may be understood as follows.

Hiding: Vampires are generally required to hide from mortals, either by removing themselves from human contact (except to feed) or by pretending to be human to blend in. This is less a rule and more common sense. If humans were to discover that vampires were real, the collective weight of the living might overwhelm the nocturnal.

Creating Others: In order to create a new vampire, a bloodsucker must obtain permission from an elder in local authority. Although the imbued probably never learn the details of this arrangement, they might notice that a vampire bent on infecting a particular human becomes relentless in pursuing that chosen victim or a type of victim (say, powerful businessmen or accountants). Such determination is due to the rarity with which permission is granted to create another of the undead, and a vampire who gains such approval chooses his progeny very carefully.

A vampire who creates another without permission risks the destruction of both herself and her fledgling. Again, though hunters don’t see the reasons behind such a situation, they might well have to deal with the fallout when numerous rots seem determined to find and destroy one or two of their kind. What could these targets possibly have done to their own, and are they potential hunter allies as a result?

Destruction: Vampires cannot murder each other with impunity. Doing so, like creating new vampires, requires a mandate from a ruling elder. Vampires who wish to remove rivals must do so through an intermediary or a catspaw so that attention is not drawn to themselves. Hunters make excellent pawns.

vampires find themselves in power and must contend with other undead rabble.

As far as this “class struggle” works in **Hunter**, consider what each of your vampires has to lose. A gang of bomb-throwing anarchists that wants the city’s elder vampire staked and burned has only its members’ unives to lose, which means it fights with frightening intensity.

In turn, said elder must not only put down the “revolt” but do so in such a way that his interests in banking and industry aren’t compromised. Of course, the imbued probably never know exactly what the struggle involves, or perhaps that a struggle even exists. But if the imbued become aware that one group of vampires might lead them to another, what do they do? Hope that one destroys the other and that they can clean up the leftovers? Ally with the “lesser evil”?

Many hunters also come from working-class backgrounds. The desire to “stick it to the Man” might resonate with such people, and if “the Man” also happens to be a rot, so much the better! You are the final arbiter in how much of this undead class struggle the chosen actually see (“not enough” is probably best), but any glimpse of nightcrawler control of human authorities is sure to terrify the imbued.

MONSTERS VERSUS TRUE MONSTERS

Not all vampires are interested in hiding among humanity. Sometimes, bloodsuckers act and feed overtly. Such behavior is possible from a very young or stupid leech, or an uninitiated one — she just doesn’t know any better and allows her existence be known to anyone who sees her and who can accept her state. But some older, initiated and smart vampires choose to act out in the open. They don’t seek to hide their nature or identity, and even believe that no vampire should, that the undead should openly lord over the human herd. Sometimes these vampires not only kill their prey, they toy with hapless people, play games with them or bury them alive. Worse, these brutal vampires often travel in groups and are an even greater threat for it.

In contrast, hunters who follow a vampire and observe it feeding may notice that it doesn’t kill (Gideon in Chapter 6 might be such an example). Whether this “leniency” is practiced because the vampire doesn’t wish to murder its prey or it simply wants to avoid notice, hunters may believe that such “mercy” or even “remorse” is significant.

The reasons for this variant behavior are mysterious to the imbued, of course. One theory, popular among Redeemers and Martyrs, is that vampires who don’t wish to kill still have souls, are outcasts or remember and long for their humanity — and are therefore salvageable. Avengers can find themselves in a terrible quandary where rots’ relative humanity is concerned. The more violent bloodsuckers obviously need to die first, but the “peaceful” ones are easier targets. And Visionaries can wonder whether there’s a deeper meaning to the whole mess....

Encountering a gang of violent bloodsuckers might make for an interesting change of pace after a story focusing on one who wishes to be saved or after a story about an elder who strikes through proxies. The

characters might encounter a group of rots that turns humans into vampires, buries them and then takes bets on which of the victims will claw their way out. If the characters act to stop the slaughter, they find that the beasts also have powers that the imbued have never seen before. Are these creatures vampires at all?

VAMPIRE TACTICS

No one likes to be harassed, much less hunted, and a nightcrawler’s comfortable existence depends on secrecy. Many old undead have heard of vampire hunters throughout the centuries (although the imbued are a new and largely unknown phenomenon), and have strategies to employ in case of such “unpleasantness.”

THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

Hunters can tell vampires from normal people thanks to second sight and some observation edges, but other humans can’t. That means vampires tend to stick to crowds. They walk among their prey, knowing that humans create camouflage for them. A vampire trying to escape some of the chosen can do so by jumping into a cab or ducking into a movie theater. Hunters, after all, have to keep their activities secret just as vampires do (if for different reasons), so they can’t necessarily attack rots in plain sight without bringing unwanted mortal and immortal attention upon themselves. If five people suddenly leap on one “defenseless” woman, passersby may well move to defend her (or at least call the cops).

Some vampires take full advantage of their capacity to blend in and don’t put themselves in obvious places of power or in the limelight. Consider a rich industry tycoon who is liable to draw attention from the press, rivals and others — before even hunters — when he is seen out and about. If he were also a vampire, it would be hard to maintain any kind of existence while he has a nightly need to feed. Now, if that industry tycoon is a blood slave (or simply a pawn) and the real vampire is the tycoon’s butler or personal assistant, the vampire suddenly has much more freedom and anonymity, without compromising any mortal influence or the liberty of existing as a monster.

Vampires are parasites and rely on “facelessness.” They attach themselves to a host — often a city — and try to feed without killing it. If the host dies, the parasite has to find another source of nourishment. Vampires are therefore few in number — a large city might support one vampire per 100,000 people. Some cities are overpopulated with undead, of course, to a degree that you can decide depending on how desperate and obvious you want leeches to be in order to survive in your chronicle. Consider, too, that the vampires whom imbued are likely to encounter are young ones who still go out at night. The hideous, sewer-dwelling breed and the elders who never stir from their homes usually don’t blend in and therefore avoid human contact. This removal protects them from

MINDLESS BEASTS

Not all vampires are suave, sophisticated and cultured. Sometimes, what a hunter thinks is a walking-dead shambler is really a feral vampire. Encrusted with blood and filth, these creatures stalk the inner cities, hide in abandoned buildings and feed on anyone crossing their paths. While not intelligent per se, these horrors are quite cunning and carefully avoid being seen until they strike.

When survival is at stake, these beasts are more vicious than *any* vampire. They kill indiscriminately and aren't worried about hiding bodies or covering their trail. They use their supernatural powers openly if they feel threatened. Perhaps their only saving grace in this last abuse is that their powers tend toward "simple" capabilities such as amazing speed and strength, rather than the showy shadow control or complex mind-warping powers of more subtle and rational vampires. Such "basic" powers can make wild rot's activities misunderstood or easily overlooked.

One of the most dangerous things about any feral creature is that other vampires will destroy them if it protects themselves from discovery. If one sloppy vampire is recognized for what it is, the existence of all is in jeopardy. A group of hunters that tracks down and kills a mindless vampire may therefore do the leech community a service, and the chosen may even reveal their methods and capabilities to observant undead.

discovery by humans and hunters (unless the imbued manage to track one down through the beings' intermediaries).

VAMPIRES DON'T DIRTY THEIR HANDS...

Despite the myriad and varied powers at bloodsuckers' disposal, their most frightening capabilities are quite mundane. A hunter who makes a nuisance of himself may find that his electricity is suddenly shut off or that his car is inexplicably repossessed. ("inexplicably" from his perspective, anyway). Even if the hunter can clear up the confusion, doing so takes time and effort. When creating a vampire to act as an adversary, consider whether the creature has any degree of influence in the mundane world and where it lies. In game terms, this means considering the rot's Backgrounds.

First of all, vampires haven't been touched by the Messengers so they don't have access to imbued-specific Backgrounds such as Bystanders, Destiny, Exposure or Patron. Also, they tend to be too insular to have true friends (and therefore to lack Allies). The other Backgrounds listed in **Hunter** are fair

game, however. In addition, some of the Backgrounds in the various creed books (such as *Grace Under Pressure* and *Steel Nerves*) might be applicable. One of these (Cult, from **Hunter Book: Avenger**) is discussed below as it applies to the undead.

Arsenal: Depending upon where a vampire's power lies, she may have access to state-of-the-art equipment and weapons — or she might still carry a flintlock pistol. Beware of turning a vampire's lair into a "treasure trove," though. If a bloodsucker has a stash of weapons, consider how old or well maintained the equipment is (and how likely it is to malfunction).

Blood Slaves: Whereas mortals have friends, vampires have servants. A vampire with a rating in this Background has a number of humans (or animals) bound to him (see "Blood Slaves," p. 93). These servants differ from simple employees in that they have some measure of supernatural power and are loyal to their master far beyond anything money could inspire. Blood slaves are usually willing to die for their master, whether or not they know his true nature. And yet, consider that a vampire who maintains a "stable" of slaves must feed them blood on a fairly regular basis, which means feeding *himself* frequently.

Contacts: Immortality affords the opportunity to meet a lot of people. A vampire may be able to call on informants on the rough streets of his own city or in the halls of power across the world. A vampire's contacts may be other vampires or unwitting mortals, but this Background works much the way for bloodsuckers as it does for hunters in all other respects.

Cult: As witnessed in Chapter 6, vampires are capable of building cults around themselves. An occasional display of supernatural power and some well-chosen words are sometimes all that's required. Cultists are rarely blood slaves. More often, they're people who are easily deluded or given direction because they lack their own. A cult typically serves as a blood supply for the vampire (a group based on blood or sex is a good cover). Although cultists don't have the same devotion to their vampire leader that blood slaves do, they can put hunters in the uncomfortable position of having to harm misguided people or of allowing the creature to escape while his followers intervene. Cultists also have day jobs, and those occupations sometimes put the followers in positions to harass or harm hunters — police, health inspectors, child welfare agents.

Fame: If fame is a double-edged sword for hunters, it's all the more dangerous for vampires. A famous bloodsucker has a lot to explain about her behavior. The old "sunlight allergy" excuse goes only so far. A famous vampire has an excuse to be accompanied by armed bodyguards, though, and cannot be made to simply "disappear." Her death is

investigated thoroughly, because the public wants to know the truth. A particularly vindictive vampire may even fake her own death and make the hunters seem responsible. After all, her famous alter ego would have to die eventually, and eliminating a potential threat in the process cushions the blow somewhat. Famous people can also take on pet causes, and their words tend to be heard. A famous vampire might speak out against vigilantism and produce supporting evidence: photos of hunters walking the streets with stakes and weapons.

Influence: The quintessential vampire Background. Many undead seem to have some degree of influence in a city. The specifics vary, running the gamut from having a puppet at city hall to manipulating a street gang to having blackmail material on a prominent individual. A vampire's Influence might also extend to the national level, which means she could get the hunters noticed not only by local police but by the FBI or the DEA. On a more basic level, a rot might simply be a respected figure in a city or neighborhood. Gossip created about a hunter in his own social circles can cause the target's Contacts or Influence to dry up.

Vampires rarely exercise Influence directly because they want to keep it. They work through agents and never speak to important figures except through assistants and subordinates. When plotting out a vampire's Influence, consider the paths he takes to achieve his ends — and where along the line a hunter could disrupt those efforts.

Mentor: A vampire's teacher or guide is typically the bloodsucker who turned him. This relationship is significant because a group of hunters that destroys a vampire may come under scrutiny (and fire) from the victim's mentor. As discussed previously, nightcrawlers tend to be tenacious in pursuing and protecting their progeny. Regardless of whether a vampire actually invests emotion in her "offspring," she certainly invests time and effort. A vampire's mentor is certainly older and probably better connected than the "student," and might come after hunters to seek revenge — or a replacement.

Resources: Not every vampire is rich, but many elders have money at their disposal simply because they've been around long enough to accrue it. Apart from "old money," Resources can take the form of embezzlement (a leech might have pawns in a business who can divert funds, possibly without puppets' conscious knowledge), legal enterprise (perhaps from the vampire's breathing days, or not — an Internet business can be run from home, day or night), or illegal enterprise (a vampire may deal in drugs, weapons and/or prostitution).

BUT THEY DO FIGHT DIRTY

Secrecy is essential to vampires' survival. They don't play around when someone investigates them or gets too close to uncovering their endeavors. If a vampire discovers that he's under scrutiny — say, proxies go missing, operations are repeatedly disrupted or agents simply spot certain people in the vicinity too often for comfort — he probably devotes as much energy as necessary to learn who's watching him, and to assess whether they actually constitute a threat or can be used as pawns. If the vampire decides that a group of hunters is a genuine threat, he does his best to find out who they truly are. That's when the chosen are really in trouble.

Vampires don't normally fight by any code of honor. They're pragmatists. As well they should be, because their very existence is at stake! A hunter with any family or friends, no matter how remote, endangers those people by stalking the undead.

But rather than exert too much effort, a vampire initially targets the hunter himself by roundabout means. If one of the imbued is commonly out all night, the bloodsucker may send minions to break into his home and turn on loud, obnoxious music. Someone will eventually call the police and/or a property manager, which may result in complaints and eventual eviction (or, more immediately, the police entering the home and finding whatever incriminating evidence there might be — and vampires aren't above leaving some behind). Any hunter with a criminal record might well find himself under police scrutiny, which makes stalking vampires difficult. His bank may hold checks for long periods of time before processing them (or lose them altogether), denying him access to his money. His driver's license might be revoked. His medical insurance could be suspended. It depends on where the vampire can hurt the hunter without playing his hand directly.

Sometimes, however, the message just doesn't sink in. Likewise, not *all* vampires have influence in the necessary places to put a hunter through the wringer. If getting one of the chosen evicted doesn't warn him off (or is not an option), perhaps kidnapping his child makes more of an impact. Maybe invading the mind of one of the hunter's wife's co-workers and forcing him to come to work and shoot people makes a point. A vampire who can command animals might send rats into the hunter's home to bite him or his family, infecting them with whatever the animals might be carrying.

Whatever the vampire chooses to do, she sends a subtle or painfully clear message: "I know how to hurt you." Another common catch phrase is, "You brought this on yourself." Anonymity is just as important to hunters as it is to vampires. Vampires don't shirk from hitting a foe where it hurts, and because most vampires

either have abandoned their mortal families or watched them die long ago, hunters can't retaliate strictly in kind.

THE VAMPIRE'S HAVEN

Ghouled guard dogs? Booby traps? Silent alarms? Par for the course in a bloodsucker's lair. The more powerful the vampire, the more likely he is to have elaborate defenses at his haven. After all, as he does need a place to take shelter from the sun during the day, he wants to be safe doing so. Really old leeches remember the days when the Church's inquisitors beat down their doors and dragged away to the fires any vampire unfortunate enough to be caught. A group of hunters invading a vampire's lair, even during the day, should never have an easy time of it.

Not all vampires have large, stately homes, but those who do hire guards. Although one or two of these agents might be blood slaves, most are simply uninformed and well-paid humans. This puts the imbued in the difficult position of having to bypass or incapacitate people who are only doing their jobs (and knocking someone out is far more difficult and dangerous than Hollywood portrays). These guards may be armed, too, and probably call the police at the first sign of trouble.

Some people, utilities workers and police among them, have the legal right to enter private homes. A hunter who works in such a profession (or who has

friends who do) has an advantage, but one he must play carefully. Vampires are usually smart enough to rest somewhere well away from anything that would be accessible during the day (such as a gas meter). And though police can enter homes, they need a warrant to do so (or probable cause, but a warrant is the better bet). A warrant states specifically what rooms may be searched and for what, which means that if the hunters don't know the layout of the house, getting the legal right to search might not accomplish anything except to tip their hand.

A vampire who doesn't live in a house still defends his hideaway. Some leeches rent apartments for appearances' sake but sleep in storage lockers. Others move from place to place and have a number of possible havens that they can use (although this practice is relatively uncommon as vampires typically fall into routines). A truly brutal vampire may invade a home, kill or enslave the occupants and reside there for as long as he pleases. And some bloodsuckers actually make their homes in the sewers. These last are probably the most dangerous havens a hunter can enter — no windows, unfamiliar terrain and poisonous gases (to which vampires are immune) are just the beginning. When swarms of rats augmented with vampire blood start chewing through the hunters' clothes, they may well wish they'd never been born (or at least imbued).



And no matter where a vampire dwells, a hunter should never assume that the bloodsucker won't blow it up or burn it down — and take invaders with it — to cover his own escape.

THE UNDEAD PERSPECTIVE

The imbued are new to the supernatural scene, and the few vampires who have seen them at work and survived have some fairly gross misconceptions about the chosen. Some bloodsuckers believe hunters to be human wizards of some kind. Because hunters sometimes rely on religious paraphernalia, vampires may assume that they're agents of the Church, instituting some new Inquisition. To date, no surviving vampire knows about hunter-net or anything about the Messengers.

WHAT VAMPIRES KNOW

Some vampires can see "auras" — bands of color around other beings that reveal a subject's emotional state. Rots themselves have extremely pale auras, whereas other supernatural beings have auras that flicker, sparkle or change color. The auras of the imbued appear to be luminous gold (see p. 96 for details on the Aura Sight power). Furthermore, this aura doesn't seem to carry with it an implicit emotion in itself. To a vampire experienced in interpreting what she sees through Aura Sight, a yellow streak might indicate calm. The odd gold color doesn't suggest anything to a vampire, though, even to those perceptive enough to see the gold at all. The imbued thus remain inscrutable to bloodsuckers at large.

The few leeches that discover the imbued are young for the most part. These bloodsuckers still interact with mortals on a nightly basis. Elders, as has been mentioned, tend to be reclusive and act through minions and intermediaries. Initiates may see a human with an odd aura — or worse, witness a hunter using edges — and report the experience to their masters. Elders don't usually believe their fledglings' reports, though. Older vampires have been around for centuries or longer. They have probably seen or heard of a lot of supernatural nonsense — people changing into wolves, spell-casting humans, ghosts. They presume that if it's out there, they've heard of it. Humans with the power to see through a vampire's illusions and shake off mental commands? Why, not even warlocks can do such things! Elders therefore tend to mock and reprimand their spawn for panicking.

If, however, a group of imbued deals with vampires by using mundane and blatant means — guns, outright confrontation — elder vampires may sit up and take notice. Vampire hunters as a general concept are not unknown. As clever as bloodsuckers are at hiding and

as willing as humans are to ignore them, a vampire slips up occasionally and a bereaved relative of a victim goes on the warpath. Most vampire hunters last a very short time — they die, or they get their revenge and give up the hunt. Sometimes, though, a hunter is persistent enough to stalk the undead and even recruit others to help. This possibility is familiar to old vampires — the Burning Times saw mobs of peasants storming vampires' strongholds and destroying those they could capture. If a young vampire comes to his sire with stories of stake-wielding hunters, the elder might investigate the matter. What happens then depends on what you have decided about the vampires in question, based on the following possibilities.

USING THE IMBUED

A paranoid elder may go to ground, severing ties with any resources and abandoning his domain (and sometimes leaving a fledgling as a stalking horse). This kind of response is uncommon, though. Vampires, as arrogant and hidebound beings, prefer to use or destroy opposition rather than flee from it. More likely, an elder who discovers hunter activity (imbued or otherwise) in "his" city seeks to study it, learn the identities of the people, how well equipped and informed they are, and whether another lord of the night manipulates them. If the elder feels the hunters actually pose a threat, he may simply have them killed or warned away. If the bloodsucker feels he can use the hunters to his own advantage, the imbued may find themselves in a supernatural chess match.

Vampires don't know anything about the Messengers or about the true nature of the imbued. But most leeches are pragmatists. If a group of humans proves to be resourceful at hunting down other bloodsuckers, who cares if they claim to hear voices from beyond? Most old vampires have enemies, and elders rid themselves of either problem (or sometimes both rivals and annoying humans) by aiming hunters at foes. If a competing vampire kills the group of hunters, the manipulator can claim ignorance of the attack. If the hunters manage to destroy the enemy, the elder probably keeps the imbued a secret until he has need of them again. This dodge is another reason that news of the chosen hasn't spread throughout the vampire "community." Most undead assume that any stories of hunters are exaggerated or they want to use these people as a secret weapon.

Of course, an elder can't simply announce himself to antagonistic mortals to make them his tools. He must find a way to insinuate himself into the life of at least one of his pursuers and manipulate the target into doing his bidding. One possible tactic is to fake an attack on a mortal agent who's aware that he works for vampires. Disposable young vampires or undead who seek to win the elder's favor are set up to be in the right place at the

right time for the hunters to stumble across them about to feed. Ideally, the meddling humans rescue their fellow mortal. The defeated or destroyed initiates hardly matter. Nor does the “victim” of the attack should the hunters fail to save him; there are plenty of other willing agents where that one came from. If the victim is saved, the characters can receive calls, notes or emails from a “friend” of hers who appreciates their efforts. Maybe he claims the endangered person was an employee or distant family member. The point is, this new friend alludes to being in the know about the real forces at work in the world and offers to “return the favor” to the chosen.

The elder probably strives to maintain his anonymity and has to make some excuse as to why he doesn’t come forward in person. Maybe a fear that “vampires will discover me, too” is enough. The elder can then feed the hunters information (and perhaps equipment and resources, but too much too soon probably looks suspicious) about his enemies and wait for them to take the bait.

The imbued might not resist long. Certainly, support from such a mysterious benefactor is suspicious at the least. But hunters face the fact that most of the people around them live a lie, blissfully unaware that vampires (among other things) prey on families and friends. A backer, especially one who seems informed about monsters and how best to defeat them, could soon be welcome, especially after the first few tentative tips lead the imbued to resounding successes against targets.

As long as the elder never appears in person, the imbued might not have a way to identify their benefactor. Obviously some chosen may try, but as long as the information remains useful, hunters may take a “golden goose” approach. If they ask too many questions, they may find themselves back at square one.

The vampire’s goal here is to get the hunters to rely on him. When he becomes their primary source of information, when *they* contact *him* for new targets, he controls them. Of course, the Messengers can throw a wrench into the works at any time. A voice in a hunter’s head that says “YOU ARE EVIL’S WEAPON” or the like could easily get the imbued to question their newfound good fortune. But by the time that happens—or by the time the hunters become suspicious on their own—they may be too deeply involved to simply walk away. And, of course, a smart vampire plans ahead. If the chosen learn too much, the vampire should be ready to institute any number of dastardly plans (see “Vampire Tactics,” above) to force them to remain in his service, to rid himself of the mortals or to get away clean.

“HUMAINE” VAMPIRES AND THE IMBUED

Of course, not all vampires control vast, undetectable empires and sup with mayors and kings, or even

work for those that do. In fact, the leeches most likely to cross paths with the imbued are ones that were abandoned upon being infected and have no real idea of how the world of bloodsuckers works, or those who were recently reborn and who wrestle with their inhumanity. All this means they have very little idea of what *they* are, let alone what the chosen might be. It also means that they usually bear a grudge against other vampires for stealing away their lives.

An orphan or young vampire who meets a hunter might well help him, provided that the rot doesn’t meet a fanatical Avenger who attacks him on sight. If the initiate has any idea who infected him, he might give the information to the chosen or even aid in the hunt. Note that orphan vampires are ignorant by nature; they know little to nothing about vampire society or even the physical “rules” of vampirism. Their contribution to hunter objectives could be just as likely to get everyone killed as could the plans of uninformed imbued. This ignorance doesn’t mean that young undead won’t make up good stories or excuses to save their own asses, though.

When all is said and done, the question still remains: What to do with the orphan or “ethical” young vampire? Either one can make a good case for sparing him or even continuing to work with him. Becoming a vampire wasn’t his idea. He’s never killed anyone. He feeds only enough to survive. If there’s a way to lift his curse, he doesn’t know about it, but what if there is? He doesn’t deserve to die! Imbued of several creeds—not just Redeemers, but Judges and Visionaries as well—may see the logic in these arguments and spare him.

Doing so ultimately turns out to be a mistake. If the vampire isn’t lying, if he isn’t under the subtle mental control of a more powerful bloodsucker, and if he works arduously at maintaining his humanity, the hunters’ compassion *might* be justified for a while. But the downward spiral into murder is inevitable. Call it a curse, call it tragedy, but sooner or later, a vampire kills. It may happen out of hunger or self-defense or anger, but it happens. And after that, it only gets easier.

A group of hunters that spares a vampire bets on some extremely long odds. The safest thing to do is destroy the being before she has a chance to become numb to human life. Of course, that’s a little like saying it’s safer to pre-emptively kill a person who shows violent tendencies in youth, in case he grows up to be a murderous adult. For some hunters, that’s an acceptable solution—monsters are killers, tomorrow if not today. For others, killing anything with a shred of humanity left is unthinkable and would lower hunters to monsters’ level. But that’s a choice for your players and their characters to make.

VAMPIRE AND HUNTER

Wouldn't it be nice to have a **Hunter** troupe whose members had never read, played or heard of **Vampire: The Masquerade**? How likely is that? **Vampire** has been around since 1991, and most White Wolf fans have played the game, seen the TV show or played the card game. This means, despite players' best intentions, it's hard for them not to think, "Watch out, a Giovanni," or, "That's not a werewolf, it's a Gangrel." (At least a good player keeps it to herself, even if she does *think* this sort of thing.)

You have two simple choices when dealing with players who know **Vampire**: observe "canon" or change it. There are advantages and disadvantages to each.

CANON

The most obvious disadvantage of using bloodsuckers as portrayed in **Vampire** is the probable difficulty of surprising your players. You can remind players that, "Your characters don't know about the Camarilla" only so many times before it gets really annoying. If the players have trouble separating in-character and out-of-character knowledge, don't be afraid to throw canon out the window. It's the only way you'll be able to surprise the players at all.

Another disadvantage is simply one of tone. **Vampire** and **Hunter** have very different themes, and the games are written based on those themes. **Vampire**, with its emphasis on personal horror, damnation and the faint hope of redemption has Traits for keeping track of a vampire's humanity. **Hunter**, which assumes a good measure of humanity in its all-too-human protagonists, does not. If you choose to use "canonical" vampires in a **Hunter** game, remember that you're running **Hunter** with monsters, not **Vampire** with human characters. Likewise, no matter how intriguing undead politics might be, bloodsuckers have kept their secrets for millennia. It's very unlikely that even the most dedicated group of hunters gets too deep into nocturnal society and its schemes. Those vast aspects of undead interaction and unlife simply don't make a blip on the **Hunter** radar. Even though you — and possibly the players — know some of the ins and outs of nocturnal society, hunters see only the barest glimmers, if that.

Using bloodsuckers as presented in **Vampire** does have some distinct advantages, though. Chief among them is that it saves you some work. The rich, complex society of the Kindred is at your disposal. Even if hunters see only the tip of the iceberg, understanding the "full story" can help you create complex adversaries with varied and interesting motives. Besides, part of the horror of vampires comes from discovering just how entrenched they are in mortal society.

If the players know a little to a lot about what their foes are capable of, they still don't know what your vampire's plan is, nor how she intends to carry it out. If the players know what kind of powers a vampire has, the pressure is on you to flesh out your antagonists' strengths and weaknesses beyond any supernatural capabilities. Regardless of whether a vampire can override a human's will with a glance, he still might have influence over a cab company — and therefore have eyes everywhere, a means of escape and a way of tracking hunters' movements. Don't be afraid to look at working within canon as a challenge to create adversaries with original motives and methods, even if their "powers" are all too well known.

Finally, "canonical" vampires may give players a strange sense of familiarity. If your group is seasoned and mature, this familiarity may actually aid in roleplaying. A player who knows what using the Charm power is like (because she has played **Vampire**) may better portray her hunter under a bloodsucker's sway. Furthermore, though familiarity can breed contempt, sometimes knowing what a foe *might* be capable of is all the more horrifying. Knowing the damage that a vampire can inflict with something as simple as its talons may heighten players' fear.

VARIANT VAMPIRES

Of course, the Golden Rule always applies, especially in **Hunter**. You're by no means bound to follow White Wolf canon with regard to any monsters, and you may decide that your undead have no society at all, that all rots share a hive mind, that vampirism is curable or any number of other variants. Again, this approach has its good and bad points.

Creating one's own "breed" of nightcrawlers means a lot of work. It requires you to think up all of the details: what vampires can and can't do, how much of legend is fact, how many vampires reside in a given city and whether they have any kind of organization. You can expect players to ask questions and pursue avenues of investigation that you might not have considered, which means you have to make up details on the fly.

Also, some experienced players may be annoyed if you change canon too much. They may feel that you don't trust them to separate in-character and out-of-character information. Whether this concern is genuine or not, going against player expectations for the wrong reasons can be detrimental to your chronicle.

But ignoring canon has one big advantage: It frees you considerably. Any "homebrew" vampires that you dream up, or any modifications on bloodsuckers that you make are fair game. You're not bound by "metaplot" (assuming you ever were). Vampires and any machinations they enact are yours alone.

A word of advice, however: If the players are familiar with **Vampire** and you plan on stepping away from canon considerably, it might be wise to warn your players in advance. You don't (and shouldn't) have to give away exactly what you're changing, but simply saying, "I've changed some things, so don't try to second-guess me too much," at the start of the chronicle should send the message quite clearly.

STORY IDEAS

Below are some ideas for stories involving bloodsuckers. Feel free to change them, flesh them out and make them your own.

THE LIST

After successfully destroying a zombie, the hunters find a list in its pocket. It's a list of vampires. Some entries are names. Some are just descriptions or common hangouts. The characters are now in possession of a powerful tool with which they can find and identify leeches — but what was the list doing in the zombie's pocket to begin with? What if he was searching for the vampire who killed him? What if he was under a vampire's command the whole time?

THE FALSE VAMPIRE

A "vampire" approaches the hunters. He has many of the hallmarks of such a creature — superhuman strength, fangs — but he doesn't seem bothered by sunlight (although he does recoil from holy symbols). He begs for help. He says he's trying to fight off the infection and is succeeding — the sun no longer bothers him — but he needs the hunters' guidance. If asked why he chose the characters, he says a "voice" led him to them. If pressed, he doesn't remember anything else, but the characters certainly remember their own imbuing....

The supplicant is not a vampire, but a blood slave. His master, an elder possessing the powers of Memory Wipe, Hypnotize and Warp Bone has witnessed the hunters in action and wishes to learn more about them. He has grafted fangs onto the hapless puppet and warped his memory to make him believe he's a vampire who's "beating" the curse. The elder figures that his ploy will

allow him to learn about the hunters, and if it fails all he'll have lost is a servant — easily replaceable.

If the characters don't figure out what's going on, they stand to "learn" all kinds of potentially fatal misinformation.

MORAL QUANDARIES

The characters discover that a prominent but reclusive citizen is a vampire. Investigating, they find evidence of his feeding, that he holds power over city council members and the police, and that he was responsible for the death of another group of hunters a few months back (it may even be that the others' disappearance led the characters to the rot).

And yet, the characters also discover that the vampire has plans for extensive urban renewal, plans that would create jobs and benefit the city immensely. The plans move forward largely as a result of his influence and money. Without his support, the program would probably never see fruition. If the vampire suddenly disappears, what would happen to his plans? Do the characters care? Can they find a way to orchestrate the development themselves?

PAYBACK'S A BITCH

The hunters stalk and destroy a vicious, remorseless leech. A week later, they find themselves under attack by several other bloodsuckers. These creatures overpower the imbued and strip them of their weapons. Instead of killing the characters, the vampires decide to play some games. Be as fiendish as you like when designing these cruel sports. Perhaps the vamps give the characters weapons and make them fight each other (or worse, other regular people who have been mind-controlled into fighting). Perhaps the vampires release the characters in the worst section of town and proceed to hunt them down. Even if the characters avoid the vampires, there are other, more mundane dangers to be faced.

Whatever the vampires choose to do, the hunters should realize that they must escape or destroy their tormentors, because even if they "win" the games they'll be dinner.

Nocturnal

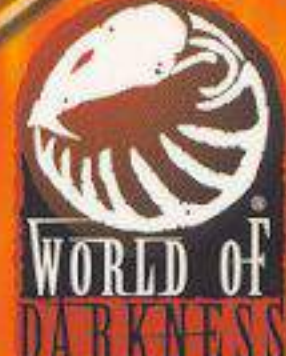
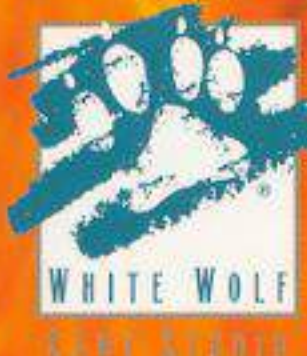
The Children of the Night...

Vampires. Rots. Leeches. The name doesn't matter. All of them are inhuman, undead parasites that feed off the living and keep humanity under their thumb. They may have worked from the shadows before, but hunters see them now. The imbued know, and they won't let the nightcrawlers have their way anymore. It's time that bloodsuckers were shown the light — daylight.

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