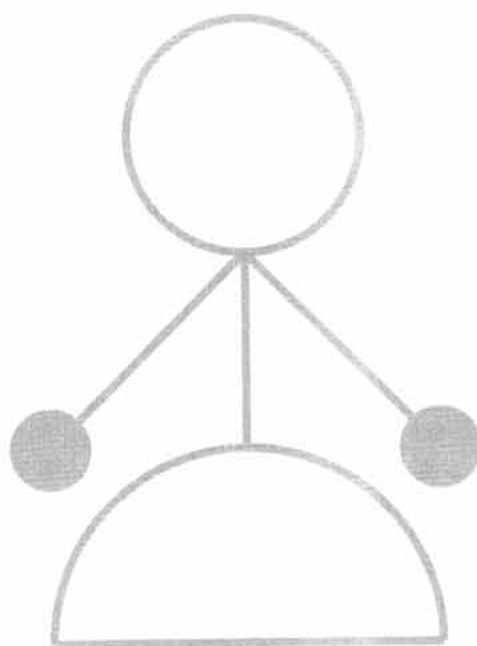


THE SPELLBOUND



An Enemy Book for Hunter: The Reckoning®

THE SPELLBOUND™



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SPELL^{THE}BOUND™

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PROLOGUE: COLOR BLIND

The jarring warble of the phone woke Deborah from a sound sleep. The red numerals on her clock read 2:14. Nights, in her opinion, were for sleeping — or trying to sleep when the nightmares allowed. The only excuse for calling after 11:00 was dead relatives.

And all of her relatives were already dead.

"Who is this and what the fuck are you calling me for at this time of night?"

"Uh... Debbie? It's me, Marco. You told me to call you as soon as I found the guy we talked about, remember? Purple? From Bookworm's thing on hunter-net?"

"Yeah, *during the day*. Call me tomorrow. I don't want to think about that shit when I'm trying to sleep. Good night. By the way, good job. We'll get on it soon."

She hung up and closed her eyes, but the adrenaline had already begun surging through her veins.

Five miles away, on the other end of the phone in Somerville, in his small studio apartment, Marco smiled. Debbie was pushy, rude, obnoxious and a confirmed psychopath, but he still thought she was hot, and having her congratulate him — even with that sarcastic edge — made the past week's research and trips into the city all worth it.

He'd met Debbie online a few weeks ago. She was one of a handful of people on hunter-net in Boston who dared to meet him, and the only one with whom Marco had ever come face to face. They'd met on two separate occasions to deal with ghost business — her first work for the angels. Both times he'd had a buzz for days. That was due in part to Debbie. She had some kind of Dirty Harry fixation, and both times she brought along enough weapons to arm a SWAT team. If she knew her stuff better, she'd be dangerous. What she lacked in knowledge, though, she more than made up for in enthusiasm.

This thing with Purple would be different, Marco thought. It wasn't about putting the dead to rest. This time they were going to meet a real, live warlock. He seemed, all things considered, to be a nice enough guy — albeit a little crazy. If things went well, it could even be a good time. Since collecting, comparing and decrypting Bookworm's

veiled geographical references and realizing that Bookworm — and therefore, in all likelihood, Purple — lived in Boston, Marco dedicated his time to finding the old guy. After all, if Purple had been willing to talk to Bookworm, he'd probably be willing to talk to Marco, too, right?

A smile still on his face, Marco turned off his computers, crawled into bed and fell asleep.

Marco wasn't so much horrified by monsters as he was intrigued by them. When the angels opened his eyes several months ago, it was like finding out that he'd been living in the Haunted Mansion at Disney World all his life and never knew it. Who needed Clive Barker or Stephen King when scarier things paraded up and down the street in front of your apartment building? It was disturbing and scary, sure, but the day the angels talked to him was the day that the boredom stopped. And once the boredom stopped, he didn't need the distraction of the drugs anymore. Since he didn't need the drugs, he could stop hanging out with Vinnie and his little band of burn-outs and pushers. With the money Marco no longer wasted, he bought the hardware he needed to do data modeling. And with the three-figure hourly rate he now charged, he was looking at moving to a better neighborhood.

And it was all because of the angels. Marco thanked them every single day.

For her part, Deborah hated the so-called Messengers. She resented the knowledge they gave her with every breath she took. Her bliss of before may have stemmed from ignorance, but it was better than the nightmare that she lived now.

Before the invasion, her life had been more than comfortable. She had a lucrative job, an enormous, tastefully appointed condo and a loving and professionally successful boyfriend. The moment the Messengers confronted her with the unnatural shit of the world, every last bit of it became meaningless and hollow.

Deborah had taken an extended leave from the firm. They had left her just over three weeks ago, saying that she needed to get a grip on her priorities. And when Deborah talked to her old friends, they all seemed intolerably blind or self-involved.

She tried distracting herself with anything: movies, novels, even drugs. None of it worked. Thinking about the monsters caused her stomach to churn out so much acid that she was afraid she was digesting herself from the inside out. And that was after half a bottle of antacids.

After Marco's phone call, Deborah lay in bed, clenching and unclenching her jaw, obsessing about the filth with which she shared the city. The bloodsucking corpses that fed on the unwitting. The ghosts that were too arrogant to move on. The warlocks that performed magic to who knew what horrible ends. And all the people who, knowingly or unknowingly, supported them. She perhaps resented the dupes the most, because if they would just wake up and stop doing the monsters' dirty work, things would be much better. Her heart beat like a pile driver and its echoes throbbed in her temples, throat and wrists. Her guts twisted and clenched until she thought she would vomit.

The phone had rung at 2:14. The conversation lasted less than 15 seconds. By the time Deborah finally fell back into a fitful, restless sleep, her bedside clock read 5:49.

Marco woke up at 9:00, feeling great. Hoping that he would be meeting his first wizard gave Marco a keen sense of anticipation that brightened his morning more so than usual.

While most of Marco's friends admired his friendly and optimistic approach to life, his enthusiasm didn't make him many friends on hunter-net. The majority of folks there seemed so busy shooting this creature and blowing up that one that they never really took the time to think of the beings as anything but monsters. While some of the things from the other side (like the vampires and werewolves) were obviously predators, others simply seemed misguided. And in Purple's case, Marco thought he might even like the old guy.

It had taken Marco a long time, browsing through the online archives and emailing Bookworm55, to put together enough information to determine that Bookworm had probably talked to the wizard in Boston. Bookworm was good at covering his tracks, but Marco liked to think and he pieced things together quite well.

Everybody underestimated Marco. He was 23 (but looked 16), brilliant (but sounded dumb because of the way he spoke) and street smart (but he seemed gullible). He had his degree by 21. Employers were happy to have such a prodigy working for them, but Marco couldn't stand working on any single project for more than a few months. Between that and the drugs, he'd worked his way through — and out of — Boston's enormous job pool. Luckily, freelancing saved his butt.

While his brother and friends teased Marco about being a world-class geek and living the life of a monk, he loved what he was doing. He worked only 25 hours a week and still made more than all of them combined. He wouldn't change a thing.

In the spare time that his job afforded him, Marco had gone from neighborhood to neighborhood around Boston to find places that could, one way or another, fit the descriptions or landmarks from Bookworm's posts. It was only the night before that he'd finally known without a doubt that he'd found the places alluded to as Purple's turf.

That was the hard part. Once he'd narrowed it down to a section of town, it was just a matter of strolling the streets and *looking*. It was barely before dusk when he'd found him. The man with the unkempt silver hair was feeding the swans in the Public Gardens — and seemed to be having a lively conversation with them.

The man was unmistakable: surrounded by an intense violet outline that shimmered brightly even in the full light of midday.

Marco couldn't wait for Debbie.

"Um, hi. You don't know me, but a... uh... friend of mine knows you and said you were a good guy and that I should buy you lunch. Or something."

The old man's reaction was slow, as if Marco's words had to be decrypted before a response was possible. After a moment, Purple smiled, shrugged and looked a little confused. "Okay."

"And maybe you could tell me about being a wizard."

The smile faded. The old man looked over his shoulder and kneaded his hands. "Oh, it's that sort of arrangement is it?"

Marco was all over himself apologizing. "Oh, dude, I mean, I don't want to be a jerk or anything, and you don't have to talk about anything or anything. I just thought maybe... you'd want to. Or something."

Purple sighed. "Want to? Hmm. It's hard to want much of anything, really, when one has gone nearly 48 hours without eating."

"But I thought you could...."

Purple gestured Marco's words away. "Keeping a low profile. I was a little, you know, *crude* last week. So I get to fast for a few days as penance. And on *that* sorry little topic, nothing more need be said." The wizard went back to kneading his hands. His eyes lost their focus and wandered back to the swans.

Marco thought the man was either crazier than Bookworm had let on or was speaking in some kind of code. Since Marco didn't know how to translate, he thought it best to change to topic completely before his ignorance became uncomfortably obvious. "So where do you want to eat?"

"Is this a trap?" the old man asked with a mixture of boredom and weariness in his voice.

"No. I just want to talk to a real wizard and hear what it's like and stuff. And if I can buy you lunch for your time, it would be my pleasure. End of story."

Purple regarded him evenly. "Well, phrased that way, I'd say Metropolis."

The Metropolis Café was located in Boston's South End, which is a neighborhood that only 10 years before could be called nothing but the bad part of town. Whores, dealers and gangstas had owned the streets and infested the once-proud, red-brick Victorians. Then Boston's gay community took note of the architecture, the location and the sheer potential of the neighborhood and bought the buildings, one after another. They fussed over the old Victorians, refurbished them and gave them new life. Now buildings in the South End were going for 15 times what their owners had paid for them, and the neighborhood was an urban gem with coffee houses, trendy upscale markets and high-end bistros like the Metropolis, where smooth jazz played in the background as diners indulged themselves.

"That was an exquisite meal," Purple said when the dessert plates had been cleared.

"It *was* pretty good, wasn't it?" Marco's stomach felt distended.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

Purple appraised him with a glance. "That's a lovely golden glow about you. Where did you get it?"

"What?"

"Oh, of course, it must be your halo. Are you an angel?"

Purple scrutinized the boy again, "No, no, no, you're no angel, though you might be one of their attack dogs."

"What are you talking about?"

The old man sighed heavily and habitually kneaded his hands. His gaze wandered around the room for a few moments and finally returned to Marco.

"The aura around you. I can't hear what you're thinking. Is it always there or do you make it happen?"

"You can see that?"

"When I attune myself to it, I can see... magic. You may not acknowledge it is a form of magic, but it is. And as I am Oz the Great and Terrible, kindly refrain from arguing with me."

Marco shrugged. "Uh... okay."

"I met another young man with color like yours. Your age, give or take a few years. Black. Bookish, but not arrogant about it. Friend of yours?"

"Sort of. He's kind of a virtual friend, or whatever."

"How lovely for you. And do you have many of these virtual friends?"

"Yeah, actually. One of them is this really cool chick who'd really like to meet you. She's pretty. You'd like her."

Marco was disappointed to find that Purple was not as good a conversationalist as he had hoped. The old man kept losing focus and going off on tangents that made no sense. Still, he had just had his first encounter with a warlock — or so it seemed — and when the evening was over and Purple had wandered down Tremont Street, Marco was more excited than ever about doing the angels' work.

The next morning's conversation with Deborah wasn't as pleasant.

"I can't believe you're that stupid!"

"What are you talking about?"

"He's one of *them*, Marco. He's a threat to you, me, your friends, your family and everyone else who doesn't know what he is. Since *they* can't do anything about him, *we* have to."

"C'mon, Debbie, do your thinkin' here, man. He's a nice, kinda crazy guy. You should be thrilled to be his friend, not thinking up ways to hurt him. I mean, at the very least, he can lead us to *real* monsters before they hurt anyone."

"You're missing the point. He's *one of them*."

"But he's not. He's a nice old guy who just happens to know how to use magic. He's still human, man. Y'know, like us? Give him a break."

"He's a fucking nutcase, maybe with more power than he can be trusted with, and he's on *their* side, not ours."



"We don't know which side he's on, but he seems harmless enough. Maybe he can help us."

Deborah paused before she answered. "Sure. If you say so. So, when do I get to meet this guy?"

Until the Messengers had lifted the scales from her eyes, Deborah had never touched a gun. They frightened her and she thought they did far more harm than good. But that was back then, when she lived in a world populated by kind, liberal-minded, well-educated people who laughed and saw art films and drank over-priced coffee.

That was a couple months ago.

Now her cozy little world was infested with vampires, witches and walking corpses, and it was her job to eradicate them. All of the old fun things seemed empty these days. She didn't do any of them any more, not even the coffee. If she needed to stay up, crystal meth promised much better results.

Her views on the necessity of guns had changed at least as dramatically. Now she owned three pistols, two of which she wore in shoulder-holsters as she walked to the spot in the Public Gardens where she was supposed to meet Marco and him. It was cool and there weren't many people out, which suited Deborah's needs perfectly. Beyond the guns, she carried a knife and law-enforcement-grade pepper spray. She'd tried to track down grenades, but none of the contacts she'd cultivated as an attorney could obtain illegal weapons. It was only a matter of time, though.

Purple sat on the edge of the fountain, staring into the water, occasionally getting misted when the breeze came up.

Deborah smiled when she saw Marco standing in the square. She'd practiced this.

"Hello," she began, "how are you?"

Marco smiled. "I'm doing good."

"Did he show?"

"Yeah, this is the guy, man," Marco walked over to the fountain where Purple was sitting. "Deborah, this is Purple." The warlock turned his head to look at her, but she wasn't sure if he was looking *through* her. It freaked her out. "Purp, this is Debbie. She's like me."

"Yeah," she said, discreetly pulling one of her guns, "but less glibble."

Marco's eyes widened. "What the fuck? I told you, man, he's a friend!"

Marco may as well have not even been there. Deborah aimed at the warlock who, for his part, did nothing but stare down the barrel of the gun.

Time froze for Marco as he traded his participant role for that of a spectator. He took note of that beautiful *mise en scène*, crystalline in its terrible clarity. He noticed the rhythmic bobbing of the swan boats, the gentle arc of the necks of the real swans in the pond, and the thick green grass. He saw the unmistakable hint of sadness—or possibly disappointment—in Purple's eyes. They were focused sharply. Debbie's face was twisted into a grimace of hatred so sharp that Marco could almost taste the bile.

And then the moment was over.

When Deborah pulled the trigger, nothing happened. Marco could do nothing but gawk.

Purple ran.

The old man had to be in his 50s, at the least. He wasn't fast. Deborah checked her gun momentarily, trying to figure out why it hadn't worked. She wasn't overly concerned about Purple. The gardens offered more open spaces than trees or places to hide. It's wasn't like the old man was going to outrun a bullet.

She holstered her first weapon and pulled her second, giving her a chance to deal with her next order of business. Deborah's lip arched in a sneer as she turned the gun on Marco. "You'd sell us out for one of *them*, you fucking turncoat? Why shouldn't I kill you right here?"

Marco sighed. He wasn't afraid and not exactly angry, but he was resolute. His eyes captured hers and he shook his head slowly. "Debbie, you don't need to kill anyone. You don't need to shoot Purple and you *damn* sure don't need to shoot me. I'm your friend. Remember? *Your friend?* We work together?"

Deborah was less than 10 feet away from Marco. It would have been difficult for her to miss. The gun shook in her white-knuckled grip as her rage struck an unexpected vein of compassion. Unable to pull the trigger, she swore and ran after Purple.

Marco took off after her, ready to dive to the ground if she ever changed her mind and fired.

Purple had run from the gardens, across Arlington Street (which was strangely deserted) and into the enormous glass-enclosed lobby of a fancy apartment building. The doorman thought he recognized the old man and buzzed him in the front door and through the door to the residents' quarters.

Deborah had been a sprinter in college. She was no longer in prime shape, but she was rapidly closing in on the warlock. The doorman did *not* think he knew her. In fact, he didn't like the look of her at all. He was quite sure he recognized her from *America's Most Wanted* and called 911. He was still making his case to the operator when Deborah took aim at the exterior, magnetically locked glass doors and blew them both out.

The door to the residents' quarters wasn't glass. It was a metal fire door covered with a stately wood veneer. Deborah pointed the gun at the doorman and, between gasps, commanded, "Open it."

The doorman buzzed, the door clicked and Deborah resumed the chase.

Marco was used to spending his days typing on a keyboard. While he was lean, he wasn't accustomed to running. He had no endurance. If the building had been much further away, he probably would have lost sight of his erstwhile ally.

He stepped carefully through the shattered glass doors. The doorman was still on the phone.

Panting for breath, Marco said, "Old guy. Crazy chick. Which way?"

The doorman scrutinized the boy. "You're Mr. Matlovich's grandson, right?"

Marco nodded.

The doorman blinked once and buzzed Marco through. Astonished, Marco was certain that had somehow been the old wizard's doing.

Purple was at the end of his physical limits and needed to stop, but he could hear Deborah behind him. He

rounded a corner, closed his eyes and knocked on a random door in the hallway.

"Singing telegram for..." he paused as if thinking, "Miss Muriel Cooper."

An elderly woman opened the door, greeted Purple delightedly and gestured him inside. But he was too slow. Deborah saw him enter the apartment.

Purple locked the door behind him, but he'd no sooner turned the bolt than the knob exploded in splinters and brass shrapnel.

Debbie stormed in and surveyed the room. No Purple. Enraged, she leveled the gun at the old woman. The vein of compassion that had saved Marco had run dry, leaving only unmitigated hatred.

"You ancient. Fucking. Bitch! Why do I even *help* you worthless fucks when you don't even help yourselves? Don't you read your God damned Bible? Thou shalt *not* [Blam] suffer a *witch* [Blam] to *live* [Blam]!"

Blood splattered the wall and the old woman fell to the floor, her face frozen in a final expression of disbelief.

Deborah headed deeper into the apartment to find Purple.

Marco heard the shots as he rounded the corner. A door down the thickly carpeted hallway was open. An old woman's body lay lifeless on the floor. He heard Deborah's voice.

"Don't even try hiding from me you piece of shit. You can't play your stupid mind games with me."

Marco rounded a corner, saw Deborah and tackled her from behind. He wasn't big, but neither was she. And he was stronger. He couldn't take the gun from her, but he pinned her hand to the floor. She was struggling like a caged animal.

"Stop it! I don't want to hurt you," Marco yelled.

Purple walked into the room. "Can you turn off her aura?"

Marco didn't understand, so Purple clarified, "Her *protection*."

"No."

"Hmm. That's a shame," the old man said, narrowing his eyes. "I'd like to play with that one."

Marco was about to respond when Debbie stabbed him. She couldn't reach into her jacket to get her other gun or pepper spray, but she'd pulled the knife from its sheath at her ankle and buried it in Marco's thigh. The boy screamed. Once he was distracted, she was able to kick him off her. Marco curled up, holding his bleeding leg.

Deborah rose, checked her gun quickly and aimed at Purple. A smile like a scar twisted her face.

"Now what, old man? No more tricks. No more games. You can't mess with my head like everyone else's. So I'm thinking that you're dead."

Purple smiled.

Something went bang and Deborah's head exploded.

The exit wound took most of the right side of her face off, and she collapsed.

The officer with the gun stood in the doorway. Looking directly at Purple, he asked, "Are you and the boy okay, ma'am?"

"Thank heavens you came in time, officer," the old man said. "She just... went crazy."

"Yes, ma'am. We see a lot of that. The doorman seemed to know that she was after you and called us."

Purple simply watched as the officer checked Marco's leg. "It's bad but not bleeding much. You're young. You'll pull through. An ambulance is on its way."

Other police entered and collected Debbie's weapons and covered her body.

Purple addressed the first officer in an ingratiating tone. "Thank you so much, officer, but now I need to take my son to his piano lesson. We're late and it's terribly important to him. He won't need to go to the hospital for that little scratch. That'll be all right, won't it?"

The officer paused for a moment, blinked, and said, "Of course, ma'am, we'll take care of the reports later."

"Thank you so much."

The old wizard and Marco walked by the police and out the door. Neither said a word until they reached the stairwell. Purple helped steady Marco as they walked.

"Why did he call you 'ma'am'?"

"His vision must be going, the poor thing."

"Was that magic?"

Purple shot an angry glance at Marco. "Only nutcases like your friend back there believe in magic, kid. You saw what happened to her."

When they got to the street, Purple looked around. "I trust you don't have any other friends out here waiting to kill me?"

"Dude, I'm sorry. I really didn't know she was that psycho."

Purple wiped wisps of wild hair from his eyes and placed his hand on Marco's shoulder, patting it with a vague, avuncular warmth. Or possibly, Marco thought, with condescension.

"You know," the warlock said, "I don't mean to overstep my bounds, especially after what just happened, but you seem like a nice enough kid. I'll break one of my rules and offer a little unsolicited advice: I suggest you choose your friends more carefully. Ones like that will get you killed. Know what I mean?"

Marco was already nodding his head when it registered that Purple's voice had taken on a threatening edge.

Purple searched through his pockets expectantly but stopped, looking disappointed. "Oh, dear. I know I had money for dinner tonight. It must have fallen out. I don't suppose you could lend me something, could you kid? Just until next time?"

Marco looked blankly, took out his wallet and handed the old man a 20. "Bon appetit."

"Thanks."

"But at least come clean with me, man."

"Come clean?" asked Purple demurely, "about what?"

"There won't be a next time, will there?"

Purple paused. "No," he said as he put the bill in his pocket, "probably not. Too many questions."

"So don't give me this 'next time' bullshit." Marco turned away, favoring his leg.

"Kid?"

Marco didn't stop walking or look back. "What?"

"You're sweet. Don't lose that."

"Yeah. We'll see."





INTRODUCTION

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.
— Exodus 22:18

BUBBLE, BUBBLE, T' OIL AND T' ROUBLE

Power incarnate. The utterly fantastic made real. Conduits of supernatural energy that walk as men and women. Wizards, warlocks and witches. Sorcerers, shaman and spellbinders. The notion of people who can perform miracles at will pervades human history. Every culture has legends of individuals who can make the forces of the universe do their bidding. Whether these people were considered benevolent — the protectors of a village — or malevolent — those responsible for offending the gods — enchanters have been vaunted or imagined to explain the inexplicable for ages. Need luck in love? See the local wise woman. Need a scapegoat for three months of drought? Point a finger at the local prophet.

Everyone in the modern Western world knows the names “Wicked Witch of the West” and “Merlin.” But is the notion of warlocks still viable in that world? Certainly in some regions, spirit talkers and medicine men are still venerated or feared. The societies in these locales are often considered primitive or backward by other “civilized,” “educated” folks, though. After all, everyone who lives in the 21st century knows there’s no such thing as wizards.

Or is there?

In the World of Darkness, a reality that’s a mere shade removed from our own, wizards, warlocks and witches do exist. They live in the modern, educated West, and in all other reaches of the Earth. They live in huts, dispense cures and advice, walk the streets, shop for groceries, and just happen to be able to bend minds, bodies and possibilities to their will.

Although most people don’t know it, beings that can shape Creation with a thought live among them. It’s a reality that some hunters know all too well. They see these fate-altering beings who pass themselves off as human. They witness the “miracles” that these people perform on an unsuspecting society. They are confronted with evidence that suggests that the witch-hunts of centuries past actually might have been a good idea. Yet, beyond legends, myths and stories about wizards, what do the imbued really know about these entities? Is it true that witches eat children? Could it be that warlocks make pacts with demons for power? Is it possible that enchanters fog the minds of unsuspecting people, authorities or even governments?

The fact is the imbued know nothing and can take nothing for granted about warlocks, their nature or

their very existence. These beings have eluded humanity and worked in the shadows for so long that humans comprehend little to nothing about what sorcerers really are. Popular myths about sorcerers may have once derived from facts, but time and mortality have taken their toll on past knowledge. These precious morsels of wisdom are now mere glimmers of what they once were. And such fragmented information is all that hunters have to work with today. They're confronted with the reality of wizards in the modern world and are left to arm themselves with only rumors and Hollywood portrayals.

At least, that's how hunters' experiences with warlocks may begin. If the chosen are lucky enough to survive initial forays, they may learn by hard knocks which legends about sorcerers are real and which are false. From these trials, the imbued may glimpse something of what witches really are, what kinds of spells they can cast and what some of their vulnerabilities may be. But such discoveries are only the tip of the iceberg. Beings as powerful and mysterious as these must protect unimaginable secrets and partake in pacts that not even imbued eyes can see. Indeed, if hunters can achieve any successes in saving or destroying enchanters, maybe those dealt with are only the most inexperienced or youngest of their kind. Surely, the oldest and most learned 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 mere mortal.

And yet, despite the insurmountable odds against them, what choice do the imbued have but to do *something* about the spellbinders and sorcerers that they spot in the streets, at universities and in positions of mortal authority? These monsters are out there, playing with the lives on unwitting people — loved ones. What choice do the chosen have but to confront these mythic beings, no matter the cost?

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

Hunter: The Spellbound explores hunters' ordeal when they face the mysteries and terror of warlocks. This book illustrates the confusion, misunderstanding and outright paranoia that arises for both the chosen and witches when they discover and contend with each other. Ideally, **Spellbound** helps you as a player understand the kinds of reactions to sorcerers, their minions, their capabilities and their influence that your imbued character may have. The book also answers many of the questions about wizards that plague players and hunters. Possible truths of enchanter origins and goals are revealed. Yet, the fact that these "disclosures" are made by hunters struggling through their own ignorance, and by warlocks themselves, makes such discoveries extremely dubious. And so it is

with 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.

Spellbound also helps Storytellers understand how spellbinders might respond to the hunter phenomenon and its *possible* threat. ("Possible" because the human masses have been kept in the dark about true warlock existence for centuries. So, how could a handful of self-appointed witch-hunters be a threat now?) 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 lead to imbued self-discovery. Contact with sorcerers might also lead the imbued into traps as witches further their own agendas at the expense of the chosen.

The Spellbound tells three stories about hunter and warlock interaction, each told in two parts.

Chapter 1: A Terrible Thing to Waste reveals just how similar hunters and mages can be in body and spirit, such that they're virtually indistinguishable, even to each other.

Chapter 2: Playing with Fire delves into the bizarre realms and obsessions that sorcerers call their own. Can hunters endure going down these paths of insanity, twisted reality and otherworldly comprehension?

Chapter 3: Serpent in the Fold explores magic accomplished through science. Is the idealized world for which hunters strive really different? Can the chosen tell when science goes too far, and reality and humanity suffer?

Chapter 4: Through the Looking Glass is part two to "A Terrible Thing to Waste" and shows how baffling hunters can be to spellbinder eyes.

Chapter 5: Cult of Personality continues "Playing with Fire" and plunges hunters into the abusive and freakish realms that sorcerers create for themselves — and would inflict upon the world.

Chapter 6: Cogs in the Machine completes the story begun in "Through the Looking Glass," portraying the modern world as perceived by wizards who perform miracles through technology and innovation. Do these "scientists" and "agents" even know what it means to be human anymore?

Chapter 7: Rules and Storytelling is intended for Storytellers alone. It offers tips and guidance on how to understand and portray wizards in your **Hunter** chronicle, embellishing upon information provided in the core rulebook and in the **Storytellers Companion**. This chapter (indeed, this whole book) operates under the tenets for depicting sorcerers explored in "Building Better Monsters" in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook** (p. 47). That is, warlocks don't have to be wizened staff bearers or grotesque old women to

terrify hunters and their players. The enchanters shown here are frightening for their craving for power combined with their lingering ties to humanity. They're terrifying for the aspects of a soul to which they cling. Wizards are only a step away from those imbued who are prepared to commit any act or make any sacrifice in the name of their mission. These warlocks are horrific not for what they are but for what they're prepared to do for power. They are reminders of 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 wizards as portrayed in **Mage: The Ascension**, without having to own that game. **Mage** certainly helps if you want to capture the breadth of warlocks' existence, society and machinations in your chronicle, but it's not necessary. In fact, you could take all the information about sorcerers presented here and cast them any way you like, with an origin, purpose and existence all of your own creation. That way, they're your antagonists alone — nothing that players of other Storyteller games have ever seen before. It's your chronicle.

SOURCE MATERIALS

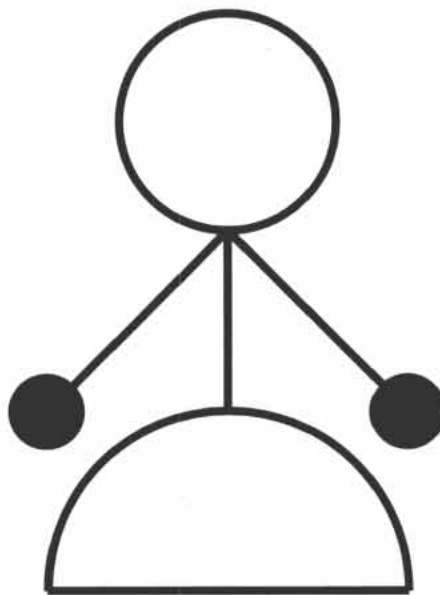
A lot of stuff about heroic people who deal with warlocks (usually in a manner that proves fatal) is available. We've tried to avoid kiddy or over-the-top sources. **Hunter** is about regular folks facing a suddenly

monstrous world. They're scared, yet they do something anyway. We've tried to pick movies and books that emphasize that very real resolve and bravery — **Hunter's** theme.

Inspiration for mages in the World of Darkness comes from countless sources of mystical wisdom, erudition and even quackery. In the real world, an interest in the mystical is an undercurrent of nearly every culture. Look to the pages of history for myriad examples of magical belief.

In literature, look to books that posit the full range of human endeavor or that show the mystic archetypes of magical practice. Try *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Book of Five Rings*, *The Once and Future King*, *A Brief History of Time* and just about any historical work you can get your hands on. Magic stems from belief, after all.

Mages don't figure as prominently in film as they do in literature, but there are plenty of examples of people changing the world through force of belief or perception. Check out *The Matrix*, *Practical Magic*, *Dark City*, *Cast a Deadly Spell*, *The Raven*, *Rashomon*, and even less luminary flicks such as *Zardoz*, *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight*, *The Wizard of Speed and Time*, *Legend* or *Crossworlds*. The television shows *Kung Fu*, *G vs. E*, *In Search Of*, *Poltergeist: The Legacy*, *Friday the 13th: The Series*, *Quantum Leap*, *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* can provide interesting (if occasionally oddball) inspiration as well.





CHAPTER 1: A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.

— Deuteronomy 18:10

I'm supposed to be making lesson plans, but all I can do is scribble and doodle in the margins of this stupid yellow pad, and I'm wondering what I'm getting myself into. Here it's a student-teacher day (notice I'm working), and I'm writing away with pen and paper. Maybe the notepad makes me feel like I'm not talking to myself, like I'm not crazy. But let's be honest. I'm not exactly a normal guy. Sure, I teach high school sociology, and yes, I pay rent and have a job and I watch Seinfeld, but we (me and myself) know darn well that I have another job to do.

But does that job involve bringing other people into this nightmare? And let's not lie, it *is* a nightmare. Would that be cruel? Or maybe the cruel thing would be to ignore the boy and let him discover just what a place the world really is on his own? That all this education we're trying to give him only barely conceals the fact that it's all being eaten away at the edges? Which is worse?

I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm writing about Jason Crown, a student of mine. Weird kid. I can't lie. What few friends he has call him Jay, and even they seem to speak to him and smile to him out of some uncomfortable sympathy. The kid stumbles through his day, always in a fog, inking in blocks and circles on his army-grade backpack. Most people don't even

notice him. He wears gray t-shirts most of the time. Nondescript. His hair is barely trimmed. He doesn't need to shave yet, but I suppose at 15 that might not come up for a year or two. Thing is, his eyes never seemed focused.

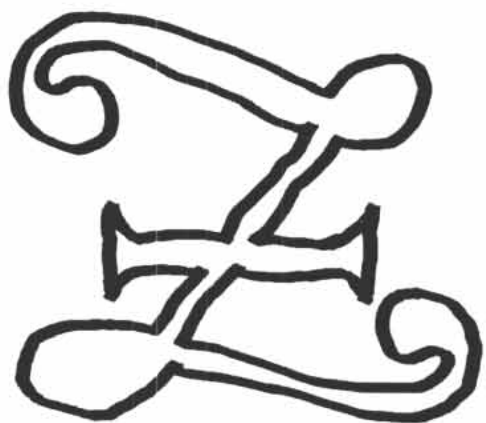
Until today. It was an exam day. Essay test. The kids hate that, and that's okay, because they have to learn that life isn't about doing things that you like. We all do things out of need before we can get to our wants, right? Some more so than others, it seems. Maslow had something to say about that.

Anyway, it was a hard test. I darn well made it that way. Jason's never gotten an A on a single test. Never gotten an F, either. His average usually floats steadily around a C/C- range, and he doesn't seem to care. Doesn't raise his hand. Mostly gives off a polite feeling of, "Please don't call on me, thank you." Always keeps his eyes hovering around the belt-line. Never meets my teacher's stare. And I really don't call on him. Some students I trap if I find them trying to look inconspicuous. I'll call on them, just to put them in the hot seat. I've never done that with Jason, though. Don't know why. Is it pity? Do I care enough? Heck, I wish I knew. Whatever it is, today he came up to me, test in hand. First one done. He put the blue book down on the desk, and then looked at me.

That never happened before. His eyes were crystal clear. He cocked his head like a dog that didn't quite understand something, and said, "I just knew all the answers. I wasn't cheating. I promise." He whispered it. No one else heard. Then he looked back down at the floor and sat back at his desk.

Class eventually ended and I forgot about it. Went home, watched some TV, ate a frozen dinner and had more nightmares about all the things that normal people don't have to worry about. Then I got up. That was this morning. Over a cup of coffee, I started going over the tests. Against the odds, the kid aced the test. Jeez, aced it doesn't cover it. His answers had such depth and clarity that I would bet he didn't write them. But he couldn't have cheated. Not on one of my tests. Not on this test.

On the back page he had written something over and over again, like Jack Nicholson did in "The Shining" with that "All Work And No Play" business. Except this said: "I feel very different today." That was it. Fifteen times. I counted. His handwriting got messier as it went, as if he wrote it faster each time. Below that, a single line: "Who Are You?" Then, at the bottom left corner, a symbol. Something he drew. It looked like this:



I didn't — and don't — recognize it, but I've heard that some of us are big on symbols. I've seen some, too. Maybe there are a bunch in the world that I just don't know. Why would I be privileged, right? But I feel like that's a hasty conclusion. That the kid is one of us? Is that what I'm saying? Some things add up. I felt pretty damn clear-headed the day I opened my eyes for the first time. I became focused, I guess you'd say. And the repetition of those lines, added with that "Who are you?" Is he hearing voices? Maybe. Some things aren't quite clear to me. They don't totally add up. I don't know what to do about this yet, but I'm going to work at it. I'm going to figure it out.

I don't want this kid to go through what I did alone.

† † †

I checked on that janitor again. Whoever he was in life, he has very little in death. Poor guy. The kids make fun of him. Even the teachers make fun of him. He smells bad, like that ripe sulfur-egg smell of a stinkbomb, but I guess he cleans the school well enough, and he's not hurting anybody. Every once in awhile I catch him standing, staring into the auditorium. Maybe he's day-dreaming. Who knows?

Here I am again, writing all this down. Lord knows what anyone would think if they were to read this. I have parent-teacher conferences in less than a week and I'm still not ready. I'll wing it for the most part, but I have to have some notes to show parents. I dread meeting the parents of my period-four class. Worse, I dread meeting Jason's parents.

I went into the bathroom today to see if kids were smoking or sharing their Ritalin again. Nothing worse than that. This is a pretty white, middle-class area. No one brings guns to school. A knife maybe, but that's it. No one was in the bathroom except Jason. He was standing at the sink, the water running, staring in the mirror like he was frozen by his own image. He was nodding and raising a hand to the dirty glass like he was afraid to touch it. He must have heard me and turned. He said, kind of quiet, "Hey, Mr. B." I asked him if everything was all right.

He didn't answer. He just stood there, his lips working but making no words.

So I asked him, point-blank, "Jason, do you hear voices?"

He nodded, slowly, but he didn't look scared. He almost looked relieved that someone said it for him. Then he started talking, saying, "It's a real loud voice. It feels like it's coming from inside, but it doesn't always make sense." Boy oh boy, do I know that one. When it happened to me, I didn't have the luxury of being alone — I had them all around me. All dead. All looking for a place to go. What was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to help? Well, I did help, but that's beside the point. I just got lucky.

Maybe this was a mistake, but I told Jason I knew what the voice was and what it meant. That he was very lucky to have someone like me to walk him through it. I took out a scrap of paper, wrote down my phone number and told him to call me. Tonight, around 7. What am I thinking? If I get caught giving out my number to a student, in this day and age? People will think I'm some sort of Chester Molester. Jason could tell his parents, and then what? I guess it would make the conference with them next week even worse, wouldn't it? If there even was a conference.

I really have to get to work. I haven't even ordered the textbooks for next quarter. I'm so behind!

† † †

This whole "writing notes to myself" thing is getting a little out of control, but it makes me feel a whole lot better. At least I'm not doing it at school this time. I'm in my kitchen. Just talked to Jay. Poor boy. He's a total latchkey kid. Comes home with nobody there, microwaves something for dinner and watches TV for the rest of the night. No wonder he's a zombie in class. We talked for about an hour, and I learned all this in the first 15 minutes. We ended up dancing around the topic we really wanted to talk about. So it was chit-chat. Small talk, at first. We got comfortable with each other since we don't really speak in class. Then I asked him about the voice.

Boy, was that a revelation. I know we're all different, but this is the first person I've heard of who's starting to see the thing (things?) behind the voice. At first, he said they were just deep whispers, but now he gets an image with them. A black shape, shadowy, somewhat human. Yellow eyes, he said, and across the body were markings. I don't know. It sounded like he was describing languages. Symbols. Moving across the thing and disappearing into where? Jay's own head? I don't know. He said he couldn't read them but that there was this unspoken promise that he'd be able to. I told him I think I understood, because I know that over time I discovered new symbols. Ones that meant different things like "salvation" or "safety."

I asked him what else was going on.

He said, "It feels like I can turn my brain on." He described it as a "switch" in his head he felt like he could flip, and then he would think more clearly. See better. On top of that, when he "flipped the switch" he could touch things and get impressions from them. Snippets of the past, who touched them last, why they touched them. There are others who can do that, right? I've read stories on the web like that. So I told him up front (because I believe in honesty): "I know what you're going through. It happened to me, too." I regretted saying it for a second, because it had to sound so crazy. But I was banking on the hope that this kid was in the same strange boat I was, and maybe we could help each other. It made sense. I was afraid he'd react like I'd just grown a second head.

But he said, "I feel like I have something inside me, like there's something I haven't seen yet." I understood completely. I told him so. That there was something I'd show him, tomorrow, after school. He agreed to meet me at 4:30 by the band room. Then we hung up.

I hope I'm doing the right thing. Showing the janitor to him is risky. The janitor and I have a deal. He works there and doesn't hurt anybody, and he can hang around and stare into the auditorium. But I've heard lots of stories about how these things can get angry all of a sudden and hurt people. Like a dog that's a pet one day

and rabid the next. This one's never even raised a hand, but you never know. I'll keep my eyes peeled and hope I can use my words to keep him back if something goes wrong. I just want to do right by Jay. Life's too short to do people wrong.

† † †

Here's the story of the janitor, as I know it.

I don't know the when. It could've been as far back as the '50s or maybe as late as the '70s. Schools have a way of covering up suicides, and I couldn't find anything in the news or archives of the school paper to back it up. For all I know, it's not true. It could be an invention of the dead man, because sometimes I think their brains get a little scrambled. Sometimes they lie, other times it seems that they just don't know any better and get the facts mixed up. Anyway, this is how he told it to me the first night I found him outside the school.

I guess this guy went here once upon a time. He was some lonely poet filled with all those stupid romantic notions that kids get hung up on. Ideas of eternal love. Sweet nothings were stuck in his head over some girl, a cheerleader whose family was upper class or something. He probably had the same kind of goofy ideas that created all that courtly love junk way back when in the Middle Ages. Anyway, these two didn't really belong together in an almost Romeo and Juliet way. It wasn't the families who didn't want them to be together, but the other students. That's how kids are. Adults, too, I suppose, though we like to think we're above it. We all put ourselves in cliques and elite little groups, and then when you stray beyond the fence the shepherds punish you. It's the nature of society, I guess. Every group enforces its own rules and that's the way it is.

This poor guy didn't have much of an idea of that, and neither did the girl. They did all the clichés. Moonlit meetings and secret love notes shoved through locker slots. He wrote her sonnets and long letters rambling about how they were soul mates, and she melted every time she read them. Maybe they really were soul mates, and maybe that's why he's still stuck here. I don't know how any of that works. However it happened, the other kids found out, and if the janitor tells it true, it didn't go over very well.

The football team, of all things, was behind the whole mess, performing a sort of dark, stereotype of Americana. The star quarterback, who I guess had a crush on the girl, took her into the auditorium one night and either beat her up or worse. I don't know which it was, because by that point in the story the janitor was crying or something close to it. His voice was slurred more than normal so it was hard to under-

stand the rest. I sure wasn't going to ask him about it again. I think the girl was raped. Teenage boys can have a lot of built-up tension. Anyway, the girl supposedly committed suicide that night. Hung herself from the catwalk above the stage. The janitor (he doesn't seem to know his own name, that's why I keep calling him that) found her.

Seems he didn't kill himself right away. It took 10 years or so before he hit rock bottom. I don't know how he did it. He wouldn't say. But he did it. And now he's back, stuffed back into his body. At least, I think it's his. He says all he wants to do is stay here at the school and be close to where she died. I'm not going to stop him. As long as he does his work and doesn't bother the students, he can stay. If it helps him, I'm not going to stand in the poor guy's way.

I hope he doesn't get upset when I take Jay to see him. I don't want anybody to get upset. Jay, either. But if the boy is what I think he is, he has to be shown what's to come. I'm here to help people, after all, and that means everyone.

† † †

The kid's one of us, all right. Beyond that, I don't know what to think. It's Friday night, and I should be getting to bed. I have to get up early to volunteer down at the Salvation Army and I'm darn near useless and real grumpy when I'm tired. But I don't know if I can sleep right now. Maybe writing this all down will help me get some rest. "We'll have to wait and see," as my mother always said.

I took Jay to see the janitor. Before we got to the doors to the auditorium, I told Jay, "Keep your eyes open. Flip that switch we talked about." He understood, nodded, and he didn't ask any questions. Most teenagers are all attitude, asking questions for the sake of asking questions, but he's a good one. He does what he's told and respects adults.

And he's a heck of a lot smarter than I would have pegged him two weeks ago. He knew we were looking at a dead man right away. He gasped and looked up at me. He whispered, "That guy's not alive anymore, is he?" I just patted him on the shoulder, a sort of fatherly confirmation, I guess. The janitor didn't even notice us. He was usually off out of his head. To get his attention, I've had to make a sound like a clap. So Jay and I stood talking in low voices, and the dead man didn't seem to know we were there. I asked Jay how he knew the janitor was dead.

"I can feel his thoughts, and they feel wrong," Jay said. Wrong. That's lingo I understand. When I turn to my own senses (or flip my switch, as it were), I somehow just know when something feels or looks wrong. The boy's perception is peaking, too, like mine did. He's noticing details. He pointed out



things that other people don't seem to notice when they look at the guy. The veins standing out on his cheeks. His scabby fingers. Missing teeth. Then there was the smell. Other people never seemed to catch it. They just walk by him, maybe a bit unnerved, but the smell is one of those "buzzard off a crapwagon" smells. Jay got it. He caught the smell and said so right away.

He's a good kid. He really is. But I don't know what to make of what he told me next. His face screwed up in horror, and he pulled on my sleeve and told me we had to go. I thought I understood at first. Anyone's first time realizing that dead men are "alive" has to shake you up. It shook the heck out of me. But that wasn't it. We went to the parking lot, sat on the hood of my car, and Jason said to me matter-of-factly: "That man is a murderer." We sat quiet for a minute. I wanted him to explain what he thought without my prompting. He said, "I could read his thoughts. He was thinking of murder." He said it was like a skipping record, over and over again.

That was a bomb dropped on me. Could he be right? He's young, impressionable, and kids misunderstand things. But by the same token, if he's one of us (and he must be), then maybe he's being shown something that I could never hope for. I asked him what he meant.

He said the man's thoughts were like a siren, where other people's are quiet. I don't know how he's reading other people's minds, but I've learned not to ask too many questions about some of us. The way Jason says it, the janitor keeps thinking about killing some girl. A cheerleader. If he's right, she was beaten to death with a folding chair on the stage. For being unfaithful to him with some football jock. That was one word Jay said kept getting repeating in the guy's head. "Unfaithful."

Does all this mean it wasn't suicide at all? That the janitor murdered the girl for cheating on him with the quarterback? As I said, sometimes the details get muddled. Maybe for the janitor. Maybe for Jay. Maybe Jay doesn't know how to understand what he sees and hears yet. But it's food for thought.

Have I overlooked a murderer working at the school?

Other things bother me, too. I don't want this to sound jealous, but the boy's got the jump on me as far as I can tell. He's a newborn in this world, and he already seems to be able to do things that I couldn't have imagined. Now, that's got precedent. Young people do learn more quickly than older folks. Their brains haven't been hard-wired yet and they're more receptive to new ideas and talents. It's that old dog, new trick thing. But Lord, the student's already surpassing the teacher.

That's okay. It is. I'm proud of him. I just wish I could be better. Maybe I could do more good. If wishes were horses, though, right?

Anyway, it was all a lot of information to digest. For me and Jay. So I told the boy I'd drive him home. That we should meet again. And we will. He may have a lot of new tricks up his sleeve, but that doesn't mean he knows what's going on in the real world. Tricks like that aren't wisdom. He has the former, I have the latter. I'm going to help him out. It's my duty. I guess I have some new lesson plans to draw up.

† † †

It's been a week. Had the parent-teacher conferences. I blundered through them and have barely been sleeping. I put together a pop quiz for all my classes, and I put questions on it from one chapter ahead of what they read, so I had to scrap all the results and looked like a fool in front of the kids. Which only affirms what they think of their teachers anyway, that we're all a bunch of dummies and they're really the know-it-alls.

Good news is, I've been working with Jay regularly. Part of me thinks I shouldn't be, because whether we're chosen or not, I'm still crossing student-teacher boundaries. But it's not like his parents care. They're not even home to know what's happening. They darn sure didn't show up for his conference, and here I was going to say all kinds of things about his improvement and how well he was starting to do. Don't parents know that if they don't steer their kids in the right direction, they're going to crash? Parents are role models. Advisors! For Pete's sake, that's why we have kids on medication, and shooting each other in lunchrooms.

Speaking of medication, Jason isn't on his anymore. He was on Zoloft (I checked his records). During one of our sessions, he told me that he had been on it but didn't need it anymore. He said his head is clear, that he doesn't feel overly happy or overly sad, just "balanced." That's a damn good sign in my mind, because so many of us go bonkers right from the day after. It's good to know that some of us can maintain our sanity.

The sessions have been going pretty well. He's very receptive, soaking up everything I show him without questioning me at every turn. Which is a pretty astounding feat considering what I'm showing him. You'd think that he'd be shocked and upset when I tell him the world is filled with all kinds of horrors. But he isn't. He just nods like it makes some sort of sense, which makes me wonder if he's going to be one of the best of us, because it does make sense to him. We screwed up the world. Society has broken its own fences and now we're paying for it.

That's another thing. I explained to him that just because these things seem like monsters doesn't mean they want to be. While a few might like what they've become, some can be scared, angry or confused. I told him to think about "Beauty and the Beast." I'm sure he thought of the Disney version, which I guess works for our purposes. Just because the Beast was what he was didn't mean he couldn't be made back into a man.

And Jason understood! He didn't challenge me. He simply stayed quiet and digested it all. So many of us are predisposed toward anger and violence when it comes to these things. But do we lash out at the mentally ill? Do we kill everyone we don't agree with? Too many people are comfortable in their own ignorance, and that includes us. But Jason's not like that. He doesn't have preconceived notions. Good for him. I feel more proud of him every day.

† † †

I dealt with the janitor today. Or he dealt with himself, I guess. Every time I think I have a grip on what we do, I get another surprise.

He wasn't by the auditorium when I found him. He was in the boys' bathroom, mopping. He looked like he normally did, like he was barely inside his own body. Maybe it wasn't his own body. Maybe he just borrowed it from an old graveyard somewhere. I wish I knew more about how this stuff works.

No matter how you slice it, I was pretty scared because I guess you don't know what these guys can do, and here I was about to challenge a dead man's memory. There wasn't any violence, thank the Lord, but you could see something inside of him was just crushed. I asked him, point blank, "Did you tell me the truth before, about how that girl died?" He started to nod but then his eyes looked up like he was trying to get to some hidden part of his own brain, and then his mouth gaped open like he was shocked. I could smell his breath. It was like when a mouse dies behind a wall. Then he just said quietly, "No. I'm real sorry." Then he left his mop and bucket and wandered past me.

Living or dead, you face someone like that and you have to give them some time. We all deal with grief and our own shortcomings in our own ways, and it's us alone who carries that baggage. So, I let him go. I wasn't going to dog him. He may have been unnatural, but somewhere in there was a man.

What he did with his time haunts me. I waited a good hour and went looking for him. I found him the first place I looked — the auditorium. The image is burned in my mind. I guess he took a bread knife from the cafeteria. He held it in one hand and just whittled away at the other. Heck, not even his hand, he'd already gotten past his wrist. There were pieces of him on the

floor like potato skins. He was just sitting there on an overturned paint bucket on the stage, cutting away. No blood. Just old, rotten skin. He turned to look at me and said he was sorry again, and something else I'll never forget: "I was a bad man in life."

Then he winced like he was in pain, and was just gone. He turned to dust right in front of me like some TV special effect. God works in mysterious ways.

I had to tell Jason.

There was a lesson to be learned, and it was from Jay's good work. He found the truth and I used it. I think that's how it's supposed to be, us working together. I know — even from reading the letters from those people online — that we shouldn't do our business alone. It'll get you killed. And I told Jason all that. That we had been put together, that we'd found one another.

We sat down at his kitchen nook and talked for a long time. His mother was home but asleep, he said, and then pointed to a half-empty prescription bottle on the counter. I had mixed feelings about that. Part of me wanted to be the high-school teacher and take care of this problem. Negligent parents leaving their medication out so their children can reach it? Horrifying. Monstrous in its own way. But what's the point of bringing it up and disrupting Jason's life now? His head's on straight. He's on the right path. Leave it alone, I told myself.

I explained that some people like us call these things like the janitor "monsters," and while that may be true in the classic sense, it's a semantic term. I like to think of them as broken but fixable, like a lamp you drop. The thing is, I said, every one of these things has got a secret. What would you call it? Guilt. Lots of self-hatred. They're often what they are because of the lives they lived. That's not to say they deserve what they've become, but somewhere along the line their actions opened the door and darkness sneaked in. It got a hold of them and they were broken.

"So what do they want?" Jason asked. Good kid, asking the right questions. I said that it's not so much what they want as what they need — or what they want but don't know it yet. They want help. They need it. Their souls have been lost to the darkness for too long, I said, and it's our job to lead them out. Let them free.

The dead janitor is a pretty good example. He lied to me, but more so, he lied to himself. He was once a bad man and that's what made him what he was, but these people can get lost in denial. He had to be shown the error of his ways, and when he connected with his past and made himself recognize what he'd really done, I guess it all came together. He found salvation or whatever else waited for him.

I'm a Baptist, but do I impress that on Jason? When do I tell him that I think it's God who makes us what we are? Maybe I'll never tell him. After all, this is good old-fashioned human salvation. However it happens, it happens.

Anyway, Jason knows all this stuff, he just doesn't know that he knows it. We're helping the broken fix themselves. Make no mistake. There are bad men, women and creatures, but I believe they can be brought back from the brink. Together, we'll do it.

† † †

Some strange business has been happening lately. It's been a while since I've written anything down here. While I would like to have gotten this down sooner, there just hasn't been time. It's coming up on exam time, and Jason and I have been spending a lot of time together. I'm waiting for other teachers or students to notice, but they seem to gloss over it. Sometimes someone will come upon us in the bathroom whispering, probably looking like gossipy hens, but people just walk past. Sometimes they look at me, but not him. But that's not the strange part.

Where to start? The black SUV, I guess. No, I think maybe I should start with the journal.

I was over at Jay's again. He was on the phone with his mother, who was out of town on business. She works for a cosmetics manufacturer or some such nonsense. While he was in the kitchen ("Yes, Mom" and "No, Mom" all the time), I noticed something on the coffee table. It was a little book, like a diary. It was open to a page. I didn't want to touch it, so I sat down and read. I'm paraphrasing here, because I obviously don't have the book with me, but it said some things that I can't quite get over.

It said he couldn't sleep, that he'd been up later and later every night. He wrote that he was getting weird feelings, like his brain was separate from his body and that as the nights went on he could sense people in the houses next door. Or three houses down. Or at the corner. He said he could sense teenagers fooling around in a van down the street, could feel some woman's dog getting into everybody's trash. And the thing is, he didn't leave his house. He didn't even have to look out the window to do it.

He went on to write at the bottom of the page, squeezed into the margins, that he was hearing words again. I guess like I hear them. It said something like "Your time is coming" or maybe "Your time has come." But where he hears the voice, he's also seeing somebody, that thing with the sign-skin. And he thinks it's inside of his own body. I don't get it. That doesn't happen to me. There was more at the bottom about how his mind almost went to space, the stars or something. But then he came in the room and I

pretended like I was looking at the floor and not reading his stuff.

Still, I think he knew I'd been reading his book. He had this look on his face. I don't know what I looked like, but neither of us said anything about it. We just went back into the kitchen and I made some tea for me, hot chocolate for him, and we talked for a long time about nothing in particular. Sports, school, the girls at school. I didn't want to do lesson plans, and didn't want to talk about any of the things. It didn't feel right.

I came home and I had to write all this down. His diary scares me. In a good way, I think, because he's becoming something I couldn't ever be. His mind is becoming sharp and that makes me feel good. There are those of us out there (some on that Internet list) who seem like they're in-tune with some big ideas, some real important notions about our business. Maybe he's one of them.

Still, he's exceeding what I can teach him if that's the case. Maybe I should find others to help him. I hate that idea, though. He's coming into my world and I feel responsible.

Cripes! The black SUV! This may be paranoid. I don't know. Across the street from Jason's house was a black van parked in the driveway. I mean, no big deal but it was real late and I've never seen it there before. The windows were tinted, but I could see a faint silhouette like someone was in there. Sounds stupid. Could've been anyone. I even looked, but I couldn't see or sense anything. I guess it just struck me as odd.

† † †

I'm getting concerned. Now I have to worry about Jay's mother. Is that what I'm to understand? I'm getting ahead of myself. I read another of Jason's journal pages. This time I was a big jerk about it and I feel like one. Jason was in the bathroom, and the darn thing was sitting on the top of the VCR. I grabbed it and turned to the latest page. I wish I hadn't.

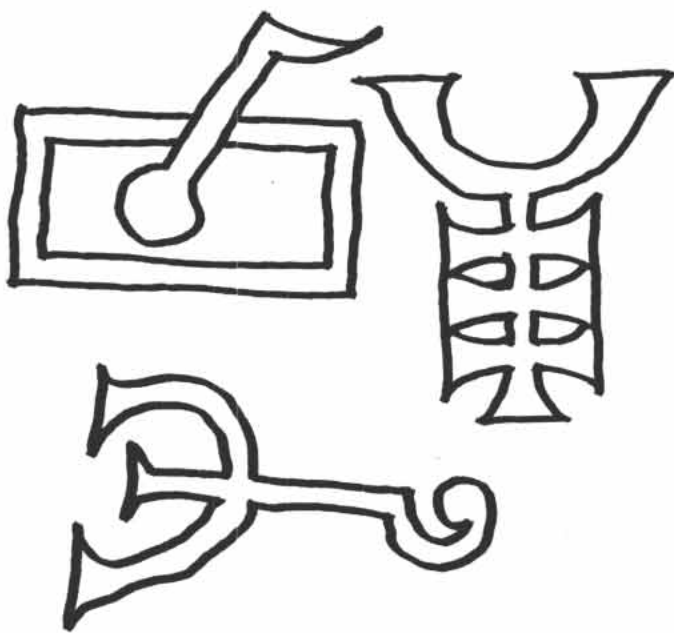
He said he's seeing "swirls of color" around people. And something about the colors having to do with how people felt. Then he went on to describe how his mother looked when he last saw her, like there were black worms around her, sucking at her "soul" (his word, not mine). Oh, God, please don't tell me she's turned into something. Is that why I don't see her? Is she trying to unburden her own soul through her medication? Is that what's happening? Maybe he's just seeing things. I don't know anyone who can see "auras" (that's what the New-Agers call them). But I've heard that some of us can see them on the broken things. I'm confused.

What's worse is that he said he didn't want to look at me. Like there was something keeping him from doing it, or worse, like he was scared of what he would

find. What the heck does that mean? In a way it makes sense. Maybe the voices don't want us fighting, looking at one another like we're enemies. But then I wonder, why wouldn't he want to look at me? And how can he look at me that way? There's something there and I can't get my head around it.

I could sure use some help here. But the "Heralds" as they call them have been quiet for a long time.

Anyway, there was one last bit to his journal, something about that "person" inside of him with the symbols all over. It was just a quick note, like it was written fast. The voice had spoken to him again. It supposedly told him something like "You are waking. You will be helped." He had doodled down some more symbols, but I don't know what these mean, either.



I heard the toilet and then the phone rang. I put the journal back and answered the phone like a dummy. I just did it without thinking. What if it was his mother? Not only might she be a monster, but teachers aren't supposed to visit students' houses — especially after 10 PM! But it was too late. There was no one on the other end, just the sound of a FAX machine. I hung up. Jason was there and told me it had been happening all day. He shrugged, and I could see his eyes sort of tracing an outline of my body. Like he was looking for something. Did he decide to look at me, after all?

That phone call wasn't quite right. I don't know how to peg it, but there's something wrong. I can feel it. I just can't figure out what it is. There are strange things going on, but they don't add up to anything specific. There's just this feeling of dread. I can't stop my heart from beating a mile a minute. I can't sleep, either. Something is wrong.

† † †

This changes everything. Everything. I don't know where my head is. Can I trust my own senses? I flipped my switch and it's never failed me before, but what about this time? Could it happen? Could I have lost it? No matter what, it may be too late.

Jason wasn't in class today. The whole time I'm trying to teach about Maslow's Hierarchy and all I can think about is where he is. Our kind gets into trouble, and I couldn't help but think about all the horrible things that could have been happening to him. I saw grisly images of him getting attacked or eaten or tortured. Just reading that silly Internet site is like a textbook of worst-case scenarios. I hate to think of Jason hurt. So I'm standing there, barely able to concentrate, and then it happened — a message from Them.

"The indoctrination begins."

It was written across the chalkboard where I had been writing notes, but my own words weren't there. To me, these had taken their place. I erased it quick, even though I'm not sure the students could see them. It didn't matter. I turned to the class and they were all looking at me strange. Maybe I looked weird. Or sick. I ran out of the room. I had to find Jason. I just knew the message was about him.

And I found him. Lord, did I ever. I was running around the school like a chicken with its head cut off, and I passed by one of the big supply closets in the mathematics department. On the door was a bulletin board with some cartoon bear on it with a sign that said, "Bear in mind the math test is Tuesday." But the words changed again. I saw them drip like liquid and they read, "The new masters arrive!" I could hear voices from inside the closet. Jason was in there, I just knew it, and I threw open the door.

How do I describe what I saw when I don't even know what it was? There were three people inside. One of them was Jay. One of them was a big guy, fat around the middle and bald, with a pair of horn-rim glasses. He was standing there, leaning against some shelves. The other was a woman kneeling by Jason, who was sitting on a cardboard box. She had her hands on his knees.

Jason had his hands in the air, his fingers separated like he was holding a basketball but there was nothing there. At least, he wasn't holding anything. A protractor floated between his hands! Right in mid air. I flipped my switch without realizing it, and I knew that Jason wasn't one of us. Somehow, he was just as wrong as these other two, and while I didn't know what the heck they were, they sure as heck weren't like me. His eyes had been closed and they widened quickly when I pulled the door open. He looked ashamed, like I'd

caught him cheating. And then the strangest thing happened. His head jerked back like he'd been punched in the face, and blood squirted out of his nose. I yelled his name and tried to get him out of there, but the woman stared daggers at me and I couldn't move. The big guy looked angry. I was about to say something, to use my words to stop them all, but before I could even open my mouth he hit me. I saw stars. The next thing I knew, I opened my eyes and Mrs. Strack the geometry teacher was standing over me.

I asked her where Jason was, and she asked "Jason who?" I knew he wasn't there, that I had been knocked out.

I'm home now, a wet cloth over my eye. It hurts. I keep thinking about what happened and I don't know what to make of it. Details stand out that I keep thinking about. I don't even know why I noticed them. The woman was wearing a ring. Silver, or platinum maybe, with a flat insignia on it. It was the same symbol Jason had drawn on his test. That feels like so long ago, but dear Lord, it wasn't, was it? The bald man had the symbol, too, but on his hand. A tattoo. And Jay. Doing that thing. What is he? What's happening?

They were wrong. Jason was wrong. But he and I can do some of the same things, so what am I supposed to think about that? Can I sit here and believe that a little boy is a monster but I'm normal?

I can't get sidetracked. Negative thinking won't accomplish anything. Jason needs my help, but in a different way than I'd ever imagined. These people are dangerous — and whatever he's playing with could be, too. I don't want him hurt. Even though he's maybe wrong, he's still a kid. He doesn't even know right from wrong yet! I haven't taught him enough! I'm going to his house. Lord, I hope he's there and I hope they aren't. I don't know what'll happen, but I hope we all make it out of this okay.

† † †

He was just finishing packing a bag when I got there. His backpack, from school. No books, just a bunch of clothes. He was in the bathroom putting his toothbrush and comb in a plastic sandwich bag. No parents around, of course. He froze when he saw me. There was still a patch of dried blood under his nose. I pointed to it. Told him he should clean it up.

"Gustav said it was a lesson and to leave it," he said. He looked scared. Then he told me that Gustav was coming back for him soon, that I had to leave. "You don't want him angry." That's what he said to me. It was bullcrap and I didn't believe a word of it, but I heard myself tell him that this Gustav didn't want to see me angry either. Stupid.

I asked him what was happening. He looked at his feet and shuffled back and forth. He apologized, started rambling about how he wasn't what I thought

he was, and he was really sorry, but that these people were going to take him away where he'd be with others like him. Inside, I felt my second pair of eyes open. "The switch," as Jay called it, if we ever did do the same thing. I had to make absolute sure about him. Everything became focused, and there he was, standing in his bathroom, alien and strange. He didn't look any different. Still a kid, still human, but there was something that tickled a part of my brain, and it showed me how wrong he was. He was "off," no doubt, but I don't know what he was. Or is. I have ideas, but I'm afraid to write them down.

"You think I'm broken." His words stunned me. They hurt. I wanted to say that wasn't true, but it was. He is broken. I started stammering like an idiot about how just because he was broken, it didn't mean he couldn't be fixed, and how people get confused all the time. He just pushed past me to go back to his bedroom and mumbled something about being "like the Beast." I heard a door close downstairs. It was now or never, I thought. I mustered up what I had in me, looked square at Jay, and asked him a question.

Not just a question. The question.

"What have you become?"

I felt the power behind it. It hit him like a brick. It was terrible. A mistake. The clarity vanished from his eyes. For the first time, he looked terrified. It was like he melted inside. He dropped his bag and shot past me, out the door of his bedroom and down the stairs. I turned to go after him, but the bald man — Gustav — was standing in the doorway. He wanted to know what I'd "done" to Jason. I guess it was stupid, but with a name like that I expected a Eastern European accent. He sounded American to me. Then he came at me.

It was crazy. Like I couldn't get my footing. I turned to run. Where, I didn't know, the window? Suddenly there was a phone cord across the carpet. I tripped on it and went face first. A shadow cast over me and I saw a baseball bat under the bed. I reached for it — and the legs of the bed broke and the frame dropped on my arm, which didn't break, but it hurt god-awful bad. I looked up over my shoulder and yanked my arm out just as Gustav was bringing a tire-iron down. I don't know where the heck he got that. He wasn't carrying it when he came in. I barely managed to yell something and the thing fell from his hand. Then I used what little I had left in me to push him back. He staggered and looked horrified. He tried to get closer but couldn't. I just kept saying "no" over and over again. That's when he said, "What the f— are you?"

I didn't answer. I'm surprised I made it out of there at all. I eased out of the room while I still held him off, and then I ran like the dickens. Looking



back, I saw him at the top of the steps, not coming after me, but staring. He had this look on his face like I was some sort of freak. Here's a criminal, a monster, and he thinks I'm some sort of lunatic? This psycho had better get all his ducks in a row before he judges me, that's for darn sure. I'm getting myself worked up here. That isn't the point. That isn't what's important. What's important is Jason is gone.

I don't know where he went! I looked for him. Back at the school. The parking lot. I got in my car and circled the neighborhoods, but I didn't see a thing. I was scared, too. Maybe this Gustav would be out looking for me — or worse, Jason. Those monsters don't understand. I could help them both, help them all, but it's like how alcoholics can get help only if they really want it. I'm afraid they might have gotten to Jason. Changed him. And then I barge in and start asking stupid questions and drive him away instead of bringing him closer. What was I thinking? I'm a bad man, or at the very least I could use a good wallop of common sense. Here I'm trying to fix things, to make things better, and I go making it worse. Lord, what am I doing?

And this Gustav character and that woman. What are they? They didn't do anything strange to me. Not as far as I can tell, anyway. They looked normal. And what about Jason? Is he really one of whatever they

are? He was alive, not dead and walking like the janitor. This business gets more and more complex every day. I just don't know what to make of it. I pray for strength.

In the meantime, I've got little choice but to go back to work tomorrow. I hope Jason will come back. He'll be in class and I can tell him how sorry I am. For bringing him down the wrong path when I should've opened my eyes in the beginning to bring him back from the brink. Now it might be too late, but I'm willing to believe I can save him. He'll be in class tomorrow. I'm sure of it. Everything will be better.

† † †

I got a letter.

Mister Bartolewski:

Jason Crown is dead and I believe it's your fault. My student, Gustav, explained what happened. What did you do to him. I have to wonder, that sent him running away like that? Did you hurt him? Torture him? Tell him you'd turn to his parents, the police — the principal — in some ludicrous blackmail threat? Whatever it was, he ran away, and was struck by a delivery truck an hour later while crossing the interstate. He died at the hospital. They could barely keep his intestines inside of his body. If we had gotten there, maybe we could have fixed whatever it was you did, but we couldn't, and now it's done.

I wish in my heart of hearts that I could explain to you just how much you just fucked things up for us. Jason Crown was special, a stellar individual among our kind.

We need all the help we can get, and when I say 'we' I actually include you, believe it or not. Maybe I shouldn't. I don't know what you are. Gustav told me there was something about you. You seem normal, but you're not really, are you? Are you somebody's rag-doll puppet? I don't think you're smart enough or powerful enough to be the puppeteer, so that must be it. You're somebody's — or something's — tool. It doesn't matter. Just know that we've marked you. You're a strange one, and I intend to keep tabs on you.

Gustav wanted to kill you, but I'll tell you the same thing that I told him: We are not in the murder business. Nor the kidnapping business. Jason had agreed to come with us freely, despite what you may think. He realized that he truly belonged with us. He was no longer asleep. But, as I've said before, you ruined that, didn't you?

I'm not going to kill you. But you don't get to go unpunished. 'Mr. B.' Your voice offends me. Gustav thinks there's power in it, so that's not something we can allow. I'm taking it away from you. As you read these sentences, your ability to speak rationally and communicate like a normal person will disappear. Kaputi. Poof. You deserve the silence. It will also make your career as a teacher difficult, which I approve of. We don't need you meddling in the lives of any more potential students.

As it is, I'm going to end this letter. Sorry it has to be this way. And I wouldn't recommend showing this to anyone. (Though I do suggest you somehow translate these events to whomever pulls your strings.) These words will look like a bunch of scribbles to anyone but you. And even if they could read it, do you really think they'd believe a word of it? Food for thought.

M

She's right. I can't talk.

I CAN'T TALK.

I can only write and it just comes out gibberish! I feel like a child! I can write normally, but, then what? Then what? I was only trying to help. I'm a terrible man! Jason! What happened? I was only trying to help! I showed the letter to the secretary up front. Tried to explain. I couldn't! I CAN'T TALK. She couldn't read the letter! The woman was right. I'm in my office. I've locked the door. I have a class starting in 15 minutes? What will I do? WHAT WILL I DO?





CHAPTER 2:

PLAYING WITH FIRE

*"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry."
—1 Samuel 15:23*

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

[At her urgent request, and against my better judgment, I have let Mother identify her location here. If you're in a position to help her, please do. — Witness1]

Subject: Need help in Washington State

From: mother248

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

If there's anyone out there in Washington State or nearby who can travel, I think I have a problem that's bigger than I can deal with. In my post last month, I discussed the ugly run-in we had here with some dead things. Most of my group is still scattered and recovering from that. Two of the guys I normally work with can help, and there's another gal I met a few weeks ago who's not too far away, but I'm afraid this is bigger than even we can deal with on our own.

If you think you can help, please contact me.

I think it's some kind of cultists or something like that. I suppose it could be bloodsuckers, but I'm not sure. If you can make more sense more of what's happened than I have, please do.

You may have heard about some of the church burnings that have happened in the Pacific Northwest. It's a low key but constant thing up here these days. It

never gets more than page-three newspaper exposure, but it seems like it's always happening. When I actually went back and started looking through the newspaper archives in the library, I counted 47 in the last three years. They've been spread across a large area — Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana — so the authorities have only recently started looking at them as potentially linked. I don't know how they could have missed that. I don't know what all these things can do, so maybe they have some way of hiding what they're doing or keeping people from catching on.

My sister-in-law is a secretary with the FBI, so I get a little more information than the average person does. I can't ask her too many direct questions, though, or she'll get suspicious. The burnings started with a handful of synagogues. Two in the Seattle area, one in Spokane. I can't remember where the others were — smaller cities if I remember right. Then black churches started getting attacked, and in the last six months or so it's been all kinds of churches: Catholic, Mormon, Episcopal. Both of the prominent mosques in Seattle were gutted completely. They're only being investigated now because a youth group was holding a retreat at one of the places when it burned. Six kids died. Suddenly it's being touted as the work of "religious fanatics." What did they think it was before?

Apparently the big sticking point in the investigation is something called "accelerant." I guess accelerant is the stuff that actually causes a fire to burn. Gas. Lighter fluid. But the cops and FBI haven't found any accelerant or anything else that would indicate arson. That's why nobody's been using the "A" word.

But it is arson, and I think the accelerant is witchcraft or something else that shouldn't be possible.

I know some "people." Unlike some folks here, I don't believe that all the things on the other side are evil. I won't say anymore about it than that. I heard from them that some bikers were in town. Normally, I wouldn't think anything about it, but for some reason that not even my contacts would explain, they noticed these bikers. I found out where they'd been spotted, and J, C and I went to check them out. I just wanted to look at them. To be sure. It didn't go that simply. I guess it never does.

There were only three of them, which struck me as odd. Why should they get any attention? Especially from my contacts? They were staying at the Elderberry Motel, one of Yakima's dives. The hotel gets prostitutes, salesmen and truckers, so the fancy motorcycles were hard to miss among the cheap cars and semi-trucks. Lots of chrome, and probably more powerful than my car or my husband's SUV.

We parked the van across the street and watched. Ever since my first night, I can see things really clearly. Not just like when I look, but better than that somehow. I don't know. We wanted to get a look at one of them and waited there for hours. We were getting antsy. Two of us have families, for heaven's sake. The hotel assigns parking by room number, so we knew which room they were in. I figured maybe they'd gone to sleep with the lights on or something, but that wasn't it. When they finally came out, I could tell they weren't normal. On the outside, they looked okay, I guess. Kind of cliché: Big guys, bellies and beards. Blond hair, blue eyes. Leather jackets. The only thing missing was a dumpy broad in a tube top with a cigarette hanging from her lip.

But that wasn't everything.

There was — and I'm sorry I can't be clearer here — this sense of thinly veiled power or a threat. It was cold. I remember that feeling very clearly. I don't think they were dead, but I wasn't sure.

When they got on their bikes, something happened to them. I can't explain it. It was like their bikes were part of the same energy. We followed them as best we could without being obvious at that time of night. Finally, when we came to a stop sign, I swear for a second I saw it say "Stop the burning."

I hate it when that happens.

We didn't plan for trouble, but we've learned to never do anything unarmed. One of the guys owns a sporting-goods store and keeps us pretty well supplied.

They crossed town using a lot of back streets. We followed them to a section that used to be kind of a bad area. They stopped across the street from the recently built Metropolitan Community Church. I'm Catholic, and it wasn't a denomination that I'm familiar with, but the church looked pretty, the way a church ought to with a nice lawn and a steeple and everything.

They stopped so abruptly that we had to pass by and hope they wouldn't pay any attention. We pulled into a convenience store around the corner and ran around back where we could see them down the street.

They hadn't moved. They were standing by their bikes in a park across from the church, just smoking and talking. That was it. We wondered if we were wrong about them or too late. It didn't seem like there had been time for anything to happen.

They had to have done something, though, because a minute or so later the church was on fire. The biker guys just watched. J called 911, but we weren't able to stop the fire in the first place like that sign said to.

Then things got worse.

The bikers figured us out. I don't know if they heard J on the phone or spotted us somehow. I don't see how they could have. We were a couple blocks away and in the dark, but one of the guys said something and they all looked right at us. That's when they started walking over.

C said let's go, but J said no. I didn't know what to do. There were only three of us. I was scared, but I knew running wouldn't stop the next fire.

One of them was ahead of the other two. He wore an old black leather vest over a T-shirt. He didn't seem uncomfortable, but it was cold out. Does that mean they were dead? His arms were covered with scars that looked like they'd been cut in shapes on purpose. I saw a swastika and a pentagram and a bunch of other things I didn't recognize. His face was scarred, like he'd had bad acne as a kid.

He and his buddies got close, but they didn't say anything at first. C and I aren't tall. They towered over us, but we just looked at them, trying not to be scared. They smelled like a wet dog and gas.

J has a temper and I was afraid he was going to start something right there, but he seemed calm. Initially, anyway. He spoke first, asking some kind of small talk question like, "Are you guys from around here?" They just shook their heads.

Then the lead guy spoke. His voice fit the cliché. Low, gravelly. He said something like, "We sure are glad you were here to call the fire department. We

noticed that fire right about when you did and thought we should do something, but we don't have cell phones like you smart folks."

They were looking at us like dinner. I was terrified they might be the animal people I'd read about. Their smell almost made me panic.

Then the guy said to J, "It sure is good of you to come all the way over here from (this is where he said J's address)." Then he said something about "Monica and David" being safe at home alone. That's J's wife and son. How did he know all that?

I guess they figure that's all they needed to say to scare us off, because they turned to leave. If I heard my husband and kids named by complete strangers — things — I'd have run home right away. It just made J mad, though. He yelled, "If I ever catch you around my house, I'll kill you."

C and I have talked about what happened next, and neither of us is sure.

They turned back to us. The lead guy said something I didn't understand — German, maybe. The others repeated it, and the lead guy pulled something out of his pocket. A small rock or something. He tossed it to J and said, "Catch." J tried to get out of the way but the rock hit him, and in that moment the power transformer behind the convenience store exploded. I saw a flash and J was lying on the pavement. He was soldering. I didn't know if he was dead or alive. C and I both had guns and pulled them out. I yelled for them to back off, and was surprised that they did. Then I heard sirens.

The bikers drove off in the opposite direction as the fire trucks arrived. They started fighting the church fire right away. C stayed with J as I ran to get help. The firemen worked on J until paramedics arrived. They took him to the hospital and he's alive, thank God. They said the fire must have overloaded the transformer. The whole neighborhood had no power.

C and I wanted to go after those bastards, but we couldn't. It was hard enough making up a lie to explain why we were out there together. We might have just gotten ourselves killed, anyway.

That was all five days ago. The church burned to the ground despite the fire fighters. The doctors wanted J to stay in the hospital longer for observation, but he left this morning because he can't afford it. J's normally pretty driven about dealing with the things, but this time seems to have taken something out of him. I guess hearing your address and wife and kids named by monsters, and nearly being killed will do that. The nurse at the hospital said he was having nightmares, too. Now I guess he's not sleeping and he looks like hell.



And in the meantime, those bastards are still out there. That's why we need help. C thinks he might know where they are. Sometimes he gets hunches. I don't know how.

We need help.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: Boi341

Subject: Re: Need help in Washington State

I'm in the Capitol Hill area of Seattle. I can make it to Yakima in a couple of hours. I don't know what you've run into, but I'll do what I can.

Send me directions and a meeting place.

Subject: Re: Need help in Washington State

From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

Mother: I'm in your neck of the woods, but you'll have to give me a couple days to wrap up my own business and get to Yakima. No matter what, I can't stay for long.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Test. Test.

Diane, I'm on the road for a... I don't know what you'd call it... a job? You insisted that I keep these things, and now I can't seem to stop. I can't stand listening to them, so who are they really for? I don't know.

The usual: My name is Erik Spiegler. My name on hunter-net is Boi341. I'm on my way to help people deal with... I don't know what. Maddy, the woman who contacted me, said bikers. But that just sounds stupid. Is this "The A-Team" or something?

I guess Maddy is in real estate and we're all meeting at an empty house she's selling. She doesn't trust us enough to meet at her place. Seems kind of paranoid when she wants our help so bad. She had me park down the street so the neighbors wouldn't get suspicious. The place smells like fresh paint, so I came out back here to get some air. Now I'm having a hard time feeling social enough to go back inside and making small talk until the last of us arrives. I can see them through the sliding glass door. They don't quite seem comfortable, either.

The back of my truck looks like I'm gearing up to climb Everest: camping stuff, clothes, food. I have the gun hidden away. It took two hours just to pack.

I drove down from Seattle to Yakima this morning to meet with Maddy.

She goes by "Mother" online. Looks Filipino, maybe second generation because her accent is pure Pacific Northwest. She has den mother written all over her, but has an edge, too. I don't know if she's seen too much or

was always that way. I guess you have to be on edge to do what we do and still try to raise a family.

The only other guy from her usual group is a fat little guy named Carson who seems a little... spacey to me. More a listener than a talker, and maybe he's not really listening. I'm not sure. Apparently the other folks she normally works with are all dealing with fallout from something that happened. John is the one who got hurt by whoever it is we're looking for. I guess he's decided that he doesn't want to see monsters anymore. Good luck.

The other woman here is Candace. She's from Olympia. She was chatting me up earlier, and seems all right, but I think she's a little messed up. She's trying too hard, like she doesn't know how to deal with people. Guess I can't blame her. She said something about a friend who died, but not really. No one wanted to pry. I think she's on something, or she's a cutter. When the light's right, you can see scars up and down her forearms. Someone should suggest long sleeves.

Maddy's expecting this "Soldier41" any time now. I don't think I'll sweat it if he doesn't show. Do we really need some army asshole yelling at everyone? Seems like this is turning into a crowd, anyway. I've never been around so many folks who claim to see dead people.

I hate waiting like this.

I think somebody just knocked at the front door. It's probably Soldier, but everybody's tense.

Guess it's time for me to head in.

Subject: Situation Report

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 24: private residence. Yakima, Washington. 22:45 hours local time.

I can't explain why I'm back in this country. I have my own reasons.

The Pacific Northwest has some good people. Without naming names, I'll say that these folks don't strike me as green. Mother seems grounded, and "Boi" (?) seems solid and a quick thinker.

A member of Mother's group claimed to have some intelligence, but couldn't explain where he got it. He simply knew, he said. I don't know what to make of that, but I've heard of stranger. He thinks the things they ran into are headed to Richland. He seems sure that these men aren't acting on their own, that they have a chain of command. If that's true, it suggests some kind of headquarters. I suggested that we follow them to their leaders, wherever that may take us.

These kinds of desolate rural places are known for unusually high incidences of UFO sightings, with the highest incidence in Wyoming. Though it wouldn't

surprise me in the least, I hope that's not where we're headed. I was just there a few days ago.

If anyone has any information on creatures that follow this M.O., or on anything unusual going on in eastern Washington, I'd appreciate it if you'd post (or repost) it.

Sweetie,

This is turning into a major event. I might be away for a few days. Carson had one of his visions and said that the bikers are headed east to Richland. If anyone calls, tell them I'm at a real estate conference in Seattle. If anyone from the office calls, tell them I'm in Florida visiting my brother before he ships out again.

If those bastards hadn't hurt John so badly, I would leave them to the others, but Carson and I both have a score to settle. I'm sick of seeing good people get hurt.

This is a good group. Steven (Soldier) is kind of famous from hunter-net. I don't want to pressure him, but I already find myself deferring to his opinion. Erik, the guy from Seattle, is hard to read. It's clear that he's very bright, though. I'm not sure what he does. If I had to guess I'd say he's either a model or an actor. Candace worries me a little. She's nervous. Maybe she'll calm down on the trip. She seems drawn to Erik but he's either oblivious or not interested. He's not wearing a wedding ring.

Don't forget that George has his orthodontist appointment on Tuesday morning.

Give them all hugs for me.

Love you,

Maddy

PURSUIT

Test. Test.

Well, Diane, you remember that stuff I said about Soldier? Forget it. He's not an ass. He seems to have been at this for a while — more than the rest of us, anyway. He seems to know a thing or two. He's mentioned aliens a few times, though. That kind of makes me nervous.

On a personal note... he's kind of cute. Nobody I've ever done this with has really caught my attention that way. I'd guess I assumed I was the only well-muscled, classically handsome guy doing this.

Whatever. Things are already complicated. Why not make them even more, huh?

I guess this just shows how much I've changed. It's pretty clear to me now that my life before was empty — maybe even self-destructive — but there are times when I miss it. The clubs, the petty concerns that used to seem so important. There are times when I yearn for the "good old days," but I wonder if it's the parties, the dancing and the sex that I miss or just what I believed was intimacy and companionship.

Now, instead of going out to parties I chase monsters and put myself between them and other people. While I guess that's a good thing — a lot more important than what I was doing before — I don't see much room for a normal life again. I'll probably die doing this stuff, which is a better way to die than some, I guess. I just wish I could take something personal from it, too. The loneliness of this... it just sucks.

Subject: Mission Update

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 25: Motel 6, Richland, Washington. 01:10 hours local time

The guy's intelligence was on the money. We found the bikers in Richland. Actually, we found their bikes. Mother spotted them in the Denny's parking lot. Glad it's not a big town, because it took some time as it was. We just waited for them to come out and followed them back to the Best Western on George Washington Way. Apparently they didn't have any churches to burn in Richland, because they called lights-out pretty early.

Mother and the little guy took first watch. Me and the strange girl got the second watch. Since I didn't want to have to track them down again, I waited until their room lights had been out for a while and tried to mark their bikes with smoke trails. Mother wrote that there was something weird about them. I hoped she was right. She must have been because the trails took. I marked all three and barely made it back to the truck before their door opened. I wondered if they'd seen me. The way they moved looked like they were drunk off their asses. My trails were right in front of them and they looked right past. I doubt they were in any state to see much at all.

They should be easy to follow for a while. I don't know if any of the others will be able to see the smoke. If we're lucky, I'll be able to follow them all the way back to their HQ. After that, I don't know.

Subject: Mission Update

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 25: Best Inn, Spokane, Washington. 17:22 hours local time

They're still heading east, and following them is easy. I've tried to show some of the others my trails, but they don't seem to see them very well. I think Boi did earlier but then lost it. The bikers still seem oblivious. That, or they're leading us on a wild goose chase. It looks like they're headed out of Washington.

I'd like to find out how they're paying for all these motel rooms. Even at only \$40 or \$50 dollars a night, it's got to add up, especially with as many churches as

Mother says they've burned. If Boi weren't letting me share his room, I'd be sleeping in my truck. It got down below freezing the last couple of nights.

CONFRONTATION

I only had time to read your email. I wish I could be as hopeful in my reply as you were in your letter. This is very difficult to say. I shot a person today and he died. And I think they may have killed Soldier, because he was fighting them and we couldn't get our acts together.

We were on the road for several hours. Steven was in the lead because he seemed to know what it was that we're following. Erik and Candace were riding in Erik's X-Terra. Carson and I were last, in the Saturn. We didn't stop long at Richland, and it only looks like we're getting ourselves in deeper. I don't know how much deeper I can stand to go. I may come from a tough family and a tough neighborhood, but my brothers were the scrappers, not me. I'm just a mom who wants to be with you and be comfortable and live to see grandbabies.

If I keep this up, I'm afraid that won't happen.

I committed murder tonight, and Steven isn't going to make it through the night. I don't know that I can see whatever "trail" he was following, so the bastard who did this gets away clean again.

I wish I could tell you more, but I can't bring myself to relive it all right now. I wish I weren't here. I just want to be home right now, getting ready to sleep in my own bed.

Maddy

† † †

John,

I need to tell this to someone, and you're the only one I can really trust to understand. Don can see the things, but since he didn't get any of the gifts that we got, I don't think he really knows what it's like to be here. I hope you don't mind me telling you this. I can't tell him. I'm sure it's worse being with Monica and not be able to tell her at all.

The only good side to any of this is that I think we may have put an end to your nightmares. I hope so.

Sitting with that hotel room smell, the horrifying things that happened tonight don't seem real. The details keep shifting as I try to write them down. Is that them playing with my head or am I losing my mind?

There are some basic facts that I'm sure of.

They waited for us to come out of the restaurant, and we killed two of the men who attacked us that night. They didn't just fade away like ghosts or fall apart like dead people. They bled and their eyes rolled back in their heads. They died just like we would.

They were deadly. I hoped that since they seem like us somehow — compared to bloodsuckers and ghosts, anyway

— that they'd be civilized. I was wrong. I guess I should remember that people don't actually have to be monsters to be monsters. They set Steven on fire with a look, just like they did that church.

But I suppose I should tell you what led up to that.

They left Richland this morning, and we followed Steven. He claimed to have done something to their motorcycles that let him follow them. It must have worked, because we tracked them to Spokane. And they must have used some trick to figure us, like when you called 911, because they were waiting for us.

We were in the Olive Garden parking lot after dinner. Candace wasn't with us, because she had to use the restroom. I got a weird feeling, like something was wrong or like I was late for an appointment or something. I guess I started looking without even intending to. I just knew there was trouble. They were coming at us from the far side of the lot, the same three from that night.

One of them, not the lead guy, said something about four of us, and "Where's the other one?"

Erik said something to them kind of smart-alecky. I don't remember what it was, but they got mad and started muttering something. I don't know how to describe it. It was like shadows spread from the dark places in the lot. They were moving like they were alive. I could feel a chill from them, but besides looking, I couldn't think of anything to do.

Steven did. He pulled a blackjack from his coat and was on one of the bikers before I understood what was happening. He hit the guy and he went down. For a moment, it was like we couldn't believe it was going to be that easy. We were thinking that we'd just let Steven be the soldier. I'm not sure how he did that. Maybe they weren't expecting a struggle? Maybe they thought that since they were the monsters, we'd be the victims. It didn't work that way.

The other two stared at Steven and before he could even take one more step, his clothes were on fire. He dropped and started rolling, but no matter how much he did, the flames wouldn't go out. He was screaming. God, it was horrible. It all couldn't have taken more than a few seconds, but it seemed like forever. It's weird what time does in emergencies. Carson and I ran to Steven to put out the flames with our coats.

Erik ran between Steven and the bikers. He swore at them and told them to get back. I didn't see much of what happened, but it was like they couldn't be near him. Somehow, he pushed them back from Steven and the rest of us.

That didn't stop them, though. They turned on Erik and his clothes caught on fire too. I just remember thinking, "Please, God, not again."

I'm still not sure that I thought of them as real monsters yet, like the dead people we've faced, because they

still looked human. But somewhere inside, I must have made the decision. I got my gun from my purse and pointed it at them. They both looked at me and I thought I was about to burn when Erik suddenly stabbed one of them. I guess his burns weren't as bad as Steven's. He'd pulled off his jacket and must have had a knife. I think he pulled that man down and stabbed him several times.

The biker still standing looked shocked. The next thing I knew, the shadows were all around us. I couldn't see Carson or Steven or anyone but the biker. I had trouble breathing. That's when I finally decided, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, so I did it again and again. He just smirked at me. I was terrified and I yelled at him, "How can you do this to people?" For a second, he seemed confused. Distracted maybe. I pulled the trigger again.

It seemed like I got lost after that. I didn't know what happened, but the darkness faded. I could see again. We all could. When the street lights shone again, the man I shot lay there, dead. Erik lay on top of the biker he stabbed and was covered in blood. I don't know if it was his own or the man's. The biker Steven hit was gone, but Steven still lay there, burned and bleeding.

Erik seemed to come to and realized what had happened. He ran to Steven. He and Carson carried Steven to the back of the X-Terra. There was blood everywhere.

That's when Candace came out of the restaurant like nothing had ever happened. Didn't anyone inside heard all the noise? The yelling? The gunshots? How could that be? Candace screamed when she saw Steven, the blood and the bodies.

Erik took charge then. He helped get Steven in the back and threw the keys to Candace. I thought we should bring Steven back to the motel. He said something before about being AWOL, and I know from my brother being in the service what that can mean. I felt ashamed when Eric looked at me, stunned. He yelled for Candace to find a hospital. I still feel bad. I never claimed to be good in a crisis, and I certainly never asked for any of this.

Carson asked what to do about the other cars. Erik found Steven's keys and gave them to Carson. I was headed to the Saturn when Carson yelled to follow him back to the hotel. It was like he read my mind. That's where we are now, while Eric, Candace and Steven are still out there somewhere. I don't want to admit it, but I'm afraid that tomorrow I'll hear that Steven is dead.

Nothing like this ever happened to us, John. When did it all get so bad?

Test. Test.

Diane, things have turned ugly.

I'll say one thing for these assholes: human or not, they're killers. They did their best to murder Steven, and might have gotten the rest of us if not for what we can do. What we can do....



Steven was bad off. I made Candace drive while I stayed in back with him. Maddy wanted to take him back to the hotel. She said that if we took him to a hospital, we may as well turn him over to the police. To whatever controls them, I guess she meant. But what good is being free if you're dead?

Candace and I had no idea where the hospital was. She was driving blind while I was going through the first-aid kits looking for bandages and gauze. I had no idea what the hell I was supposed to do for him.

Every time I looked up at the city around us, it seemed like we were farther off the beaten path. I caught a glance of Candace through the rear-view mirror. She was panicking. She looked kind of sick, and I heard her say, "He's not going to make it," over and over. I wanted to scream at her to find a hospital, but what good would it have done? I didn't know the way, either.

Steven was really messed up. His skin was badly burned and his clothes were charred in some places. He was bleeding through some of the bandages I'd put on him. The blankets I kept in back were already soaked.

The only place he wasn't hurt was his face. He was pale but he was still handsome, even though he was probably more dead than alive by that point.

I leaned over him. There was a lot of strength in him that we'd lose if we didn't save him. I had this overpowering urge at that moment. I felt like I had to tell him something — *give* him something. And just then he looked like the most noble man I'd ever seen in my life.

So I kissed him.

His mouth tasted like blood, but that just made it more intense, more... I don't know. I keep thinking of those Westerns I grew up on where the cowboy and the Indian cut their hands and shake them. Did that kiss make us blood brothers?

If it did, it made saving him all the more urgent.

I filled my mind with every good thing, every strong thing I could. Dad's face when they presented me with my black belt. My graduation from Reed. My parents' acceptance when I came out to them. It sounds dumb, but it was like I summoned every life-affirming, decent, joyful thing I could. I wanted to give it all to him, to give him back the life that he risked to save us.

And his chest rose.

The blood of his wounds seemed to clot.

Charred skin flaked off him and looked bright pink underneath.

I was so weak, I could barely hold myself upright. My hands were shaking, and I felt weirdly self-conscious about it. That's when I looked up at the reflection of Candace's eyes in the rear-view. She was staring back with this look of shock and horror.

I guess some people just aren't big on miracles.

She said something like "perverted fuck," and about telling what I'd done. Then she turned onto what looked to be a major road. Finally.

I wanted to say something, but I had no energy left. I'm not really sure what I would have said, anyway. I couldn't exactly say it wasn't what it looked like, could I? Not while maintaining any integrity, anyway.

But, fuck her. Somehow, I saved him. His breathing was deep and stable, and his burns looked like the scar you get under a scab.

I just stopped worrying, stopped thinking for a moment and closed my eyes. I listened to the sounds of traffic, to the sounds of the city, to the sound of a bad driver grinding the gears of my truck, and it all faded away. I just felt the steady rise and fall of his chest, knowing that I had done a good thing.

Candace finally found a hospital maybe 10 minutes later. She parked us at the emergency-room entrance and said, "We're there."

It was Steven who said, "I can't go in there. Take me back to the motel."

I didn't even know he was awake.

Candace wasn't even responding, so I went around and told her to slide over to the passenger seat. In that moment, she probably hated me. Nobody said a word on the way back to the motel.

Now I'm waiting for Steven to finish in the shower. He's still hurt, but far from dead. He says the blood on him was all dry.

I don't know how I did it. The others wanted to know and I couldn't explain. Candace stared at me quietly like she was biding her time before pulling the trigger. I don't care. I just thank God or whoever that Steven isn't dead. He threw what was left of his old clothes away. They smelled like burned skin.

Subject: Mission Update

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 26: Best Inn, Spokane, Washington. 10:48 hours local time.

This mission has really made me think about things. As much as it may seem that what we do is insane, pointless or suicidal, it's worth it when you work with good people. I came as close to dying last night as I've ever come. Maybe I did die. But someone was looking out for me, and considering where I was, I feel pretty damn good today. Maybe we were given all our different gifts so we can work together, to help each other and reclaim the world. I can't say for sure, but I'm still here to keep trying.

If you ever get a chance to work with Boi341, do it. He's a good soldier and I'm proud to call him a friend.

Here's how the mission stands right now: There's only one of the targets left. We've already determined that he left town. He either brought his friends back from the dead or he's figured out some way to take their bikes with him. They all seem to be on the road. In his shoes, I'd take the shortest route back to HQ. If the trail holds and we go now, we should be able to track him back to it. We have to do it fast. I don't know how much longer my trail will last. Or me, for that matter.

CONFRONTATIONS

Test. Test.

She did it, Diane.

I figured that when she saw how things turned out, how Steven was alive this morning, she'd realize what I did was necessary.

But she walked into the laundromat this morning as Steven and I were washing the salvageable stuff from the back of my truck. She didn't even look at me, she was just all friendly and chatty with Steven and then she drops the bomb.

"Steven, I just thought you should know that last night, when you were dying, Erik kissed you on the mouth." And then she got this self-righteous look on her face, like she was waiting for the fur to start flying.

Steven looked at me. There wasn't much to say, so I just shrugged and said, "Yeah, that's pretty much it. That's how I brought you back."

He looked confused for a second, like he had no idea what to think. And then you could see the change in his face as he got pissed.

He looked right at her and said something like, "Let me get this straight." Sorry, no pun intended. He says, "I was burned and almost dead, he performs some miracle on me that saves my fucking life, and you're bitching that he kissed me? What was the alternative, to let me die? To let me be a John Doe for weeks while they ran my fingerprints and finally buried me as a traitor?"

I'm totally paraphrasing here, but he said something like, "Christ, he could have fucked me and I still wouldn't give a rat's ass." I almost lost it at that.

Finally, he told her to get her priorities straight. Her jaw dropped, she stood there in shock for a moment, and then she left.

Steven was pissed. He didn't stop going on about it for a while. But the part I'll take to heart, and he said it just like this: "Whatever you did last night, I owe you big time. If you're ever in a position to save my life again, do the exact same thing. You got me?"

If that's not a benediction, what is?

Subject: Mission Update

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 26: Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. 14:30 hours local time

Two of the cycles were stashed in a shed behind a private residence in Coeur d'Alene, but the last biker's trail led out of town to the north. How did he get them here all by himself? A trailer? Or is he still alone? No one appears to be at home at the house.

Just to "feed the meter," I tagged both bikes with new trails. No telling how long this thing's going to take to wrap up.

Speculation follows:

1. The shed may have seemed unused enough that the biker felt he could safely store the motorcycles until he could recover them.

1A: The biker may have killed the owner of the house, making sure that the bikes wouldn't be found.

2. The shed belongs to an ally of these guys, and he or she granted permission for the shed to be used.

3. The biker owns the property, and may have kept going to:

a. Mislead us

b. Get backup

c. Retreat, possibly to another (stronger?) ally or to some HQ

All of these lead me to believe that we're either on or very near the bikers' turf.

FACE OFF

Test. Test.

Brace yourself, Diane. You're not going to believe what happened. I'm going to be on an adrenaline high for a while.

After we found the two hidden motorcycles, we headed north at a pretty good clip trying to find the last biker. We found him, all right. He was headed north on Route 2, looking like an absolutely normal guy — going the speed limit, no less.

Maybe he was lost in thought. Maybe he was mourning for the guys we'd killed. Maybe he was planning what he would do when he tracked us down.

We followed for maybe a mile before Steven, our point man, made the first move. He clearly wasn't interested in diplomacy. He changed into the left lane like he was going to pass the guy and then about halfway through he swerved hard to the right, forcing the biker off the road and into the sagebrush. I guess when you a man on fire, you can't expect a lot of compassion from him.

I thought the guy was a goner. He should have wiped out or flipped or something, but he didn't. He came to a quick and gentle stop, turned around and got back on the highway behind all three of us — and passed us all in the blink of an eye. I couldn't believe it. None of what he did was possible, but I guess starting fires just by looking isn't, either. "Fast" just doesn't cover how quick he went by. One second he was behind us, the next he was so far ahead that we lost him. I figured we'd be following Steven's trail for days just to catch up.

But I guess he didn't want to escape. He wanted revenge.

He came out of nowhere, playing chicken with Steven. Instead of dodging or veering away at the last minute, he somehow got airborne and came down like a wrecking ball on top of Steven's truck. Steven swerved all over the road while the biker came off the bed and tore down the highway, past us in the other direction.

I can't even begin to describe the damage he did to Steven's truck. The tires burst, the suspension gave out, the windows shattered and the roof of the cab crumpled like paper. Steven was either good or lucky. He dove out the door as the bike hit. His thick coat must have absorbed a lot of the damage.

If I hadn't been slowing down, I wouldn't have been able to avoid hitting him. As it was, I had to jam on my brakes and swerve. It's a miracle I didn't roll.

I couldn't see where the biker had gone, and even the roar of his engine had faded into the distance.

Steven was in the road trying to get to his feet. He seemed stunned and a little slow. I got out of the X-Terra and ran over to help him. That's when I heard the roar of the motorcycle again.

After seeing what happened to Steven's truck, I knew my SUV wasn't safe. Even if we could get inside in time, it didn't offer any kind of real protection, and there was nothing but brush on either side of the road.

Steven had hurt his leg, so I was helping him get off the road.

Carson and Maddy had pulled over and got out between the X-Terra and their Saturn. Both had their guns out, waiting for the biker. We all saw him down the highway, coming fast, and they started shooting. It didn't do anything. None of their shots hit, or they didn't have any effect on the guy. He was about to blow right through them. I thought they were both dead when Maddy shouted something at the guy. I don't know what she said, but the bike came to a screeching halt while the biker went flying over the handlebars. He flew right over us. I heard a horrible breaking sound when he hit, and

he rolled over and over until he stopped in the middle of the highway. There was no way he could have survived that.

We all turned in disgust, but then I realized not all of us — Maddy was still staring at the bike, almost terrified by what had happened. I don't know what she did, but it stopped the guy cold.

We were all kind of quiet for a while, unsure what to do. But I realized we had to do something, because someone would come along sooner or later. Maddy didn't want to see the guy's body, but she did tell us to burn his bike. I don't know why. I decided not to ask.

Candace the freak isn't squeamish at all. She went through the biker's pockets and found his wallet. His driver's license was from Wisconsin. His name was Thor or Tor something. He was born in the '60s, I guess. He had a thick wad of \$20s. Candace offered it to Steven, trying to turn it into some kind of peace gesture, I guess.

He said no.

She said that he'd need a new truck.

They went back and forth a bit more before she finally translated the look of rage on his face and kept the money herself. Nobody objected, but I think we all passed a few judgments.

We made plans to meet back in town. There was nothing else to do and we didn't really want to be there when the highway patrol showed up. It would be better to let them figure out the wreckage than to try explaining anything. Maddy took Carson and Candace and headed back to Coeur d'Alene.

Steven's truck was blazing away. We poured some gas on the bike and it was still burning, too. Steven's truck was burnt beyond recognition. He only had "tag applied for" things where his license plates should have been, so I guess nobody would make a positive ID on it. I asked about the VIN, but he said he'd already taken care of that.

I wanted to say something as we drove away, but nothing felt right. What do you say to a person who's lost everything except the shirt on his back?

I just wonder if every victory over the monsters has to come at such a price.

AFTERMATH

Sweetie,

It's over. Carson and I should be back in Yakima before you get this letter. Maybe I'll just save myself the stamp and hand it to you when I get there.

We have Candace in tow and she may sleep on the sofa tonight before heading back to Olympia in the morning.

Something has been eating at her since Spokane. I think she feels guilty for not having been there when the bikers attacked. She doesn't seem to be talking to Erik or Steven.

I'll see you soon.

Love you,

Maddy

† † †

Dear John,

You don't have to worry about those bikers coming to your home.

I don't want to say that we killed them, but we did. I don't feel like a hero. I feel like a murderer. They were living people. They breathed. They bled. And even when I looked at them, they didn't seem that different from normal people. And I killed two of them myself. I can't even explain what I did today. Suddenly I just knew how to stop the one attacking us, and I did it. I think he died quickly.

What kind of world is this where a mother has to kill another woman's son?

I hope you're doing better. I'll visit you and when I get back.

God bless,

Maddy

Subject: The Mission is NOT over

From: soldier91

To: firelight.list@hunter-net.org

October 26: Quality Inn. Sandpoint, Idaho. 23:49 hours local time

I've lost my laptop, so I'm in one of those places. I'll write anything more by hand till I can post it.

Mother248 and the other two members of our group left for home this evening, and just in time. The snow that's been threatening to fall for the last couple of days finally hit. Boi and I drove north from Coeur d'Alene to see if we could figure out where the biker may have been headed. Boi's itinerary has become mine since the biker wrecked my truck.

We drove maybe 40 miles north and didn't find anything. By that point, the snow was starting to come down pretty heavy, so we turned back, intending to head to Seattle in the morning.

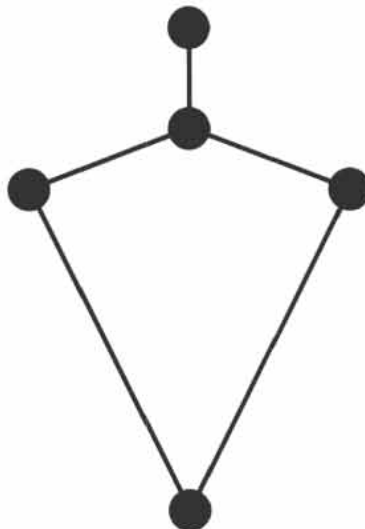
Ten minutes after we turned around, we passed a pickup heading north with a tarp over something in the back. The "something" was the two motorcycles that were stashed in that shed. My trail was still billowing out behind them.

We waited a few minutes and then made a U-turn and followed the smoke. The snow was insane the whole way. Visibility was maybe 10 feet. Without the smoke trail, following the truck would have been impossible. Even with the smoke, it was hard. It helped that the truck stayed on Route 2 most of the way. If they had gone offroad, we probably would have lost them.

The truck turned off 2 in Sandpoint and headed west. According to the map we got at the gas station, all the roads headed in that direction are local, so it looks like we're at the end of our chase.

Tomorrow morning we'll follow my trail again, or follow the road if it's faded. Either way, I know we're close.

Or maybe we're just getting in deeper over our heads.





CHAPTER 3:

SERPENT IN THE FOLD

They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof.

— Job 24:13

FIGHT THE SYSTEM

Aunt Opal,

In a minute I'm going to walk into room 314 of the Commerce Hi-Way Motel and probably get killed. I'm dropping this book in the mail first, so maybe you'll know that your nephew wasn't just a "criminal." I don't know what you'll hear about me, but don't trust the news. Don't trust the government either, but I guess I don't need to tell you that.

I know you don't know much about computers, but see if you can find someone you can trust to contact a guy who calls himself Bookworm55 on "hunter-net." If that doesn't work, I know a woman named J.C. in Charlotte. She runs the FAXwrite copy shop. See if you can get this to her for me. Matt would have wanted that. Be very careful. The people that killed Matt (and probably me too by the time you're reading this) are powerful, evil spirits. Find someone among the people to help, but don't go to the tribal authorities.

What you have in your hands probably won't make much sense to you. A guy named Matt Holland wrote the first part. You've probably heard a lot about him by now. It's all lies. He was a good man — a white, and not much of a warrior, but good. I treated him like crap, used him and now he's dead. Not really my fault, but I sure as

hell didn't save him. I wrote the last entry in this book that tells how it all ended.

I haven't been much of a Cherokee, nephew, son or even friend, as you'll see. I won't pretend to know that much about the old ways, but remember me at the Green Corn Ceremony. I need forgiveness if my spirit is going to make it to the Darkening Land.

I'm going to go now and pay my debt.

Archie

SUNDAY, JUNE 2

Loser, loser, loser. They didn't say it, but I saw it in their eyes before they left. I'm the last one in town. I just helped Dana and Tony pack up their U-Haul. They gave me a six pack of Sweetwater for helping them. Dana's off to grad school. Tony is so great with computers he'll find work wherever they go. They did good for themselves.

Hell, I don't know what to write. I found one of Dana's blank art books when we moved the sofa and she said I should keep it to write my songs in. I was too embarrassed to tell her I hadn't written anything in three years.

What am I thinking? She knows that. Did she give it to me out of pity or encouragement?

Can you write a song about being the last of your college drinking buddies left in town? Well, I guess I

really don't count. I was only in for a semester and a half. Still, the freshmen chicks look younger and younger and I must look older and older to them.

God, I need to get laid.

I really wanted to tell Dana and Tony about what's been happening, about what I've really done the past few months, the folks I'd helped. That I wasn't just a fucking college dropout, mower-pushing loser groundskeeper for the University. That I really was a freaking "hero" chosen by God or something.

Who am I kidding? "Freak" is probably more like how they'd see me. What the hell would I say? "See you guys later — and oh, me and this Indian have been killing monsters! Bye! Y'all have a safe trip!"

I just want someone who I care about to know.

I also wanted to tell them I was really glad they were moving away from this hellhole, even though I'd miss them. I have no more real friends left. Archie's my "partner," I guess, but he's no friend. Psycho freak, more like it.

Screw this. I have two more beers.

MONDAY, JUNE 3

Dana and Troy,

I re-read what I wrote last night. What an idiot! But 3-4 beers do as much for me now as a case used to! I really do want to tell you guys what I've been up to, about the "war" as Archie calls it. I'm going to keep writing. ~~Maybe I'll drop this in the mail so you'll know~~ Shit, what's better? Your friends thinking you are a loser or your friends thinking you're some kind of whacko?

I've got to get to work, but I figure I've got some time. Better to write in the morning than when my hands are all cramped from working the mower. Nights can be kind of busy, especially when Archie's on the warpath.

Pretty funny — Archie the Indian on the warpath! I mean he really is part Indian. Cherokee. Comes from Bryson City up in NC. He's a big dude, too. Archie's not really that bad. I shouldn't call him a psycho, I guess. When he gets mad, though, he kind of loses it. I've seen him do some shit. I don't think he's crazy, but he hits first and asks questions later, that's for sure.

Archie knows more than I do about the "Haint War." That's what he calls it. "Haint" is some kind of dumbass hillbilly word for ghost. He has some Indian names for them, too, but I don't remember them. More about Archie the Indian later. Dana, I know you'd want me to say "Archie the Native American," but he doesn't care.

This all started months ago. That's why I wasn't around so much before you guys left. Anyway, I think it was a Saturday night. I was taking a piss in the alley behind the Cannon when I heard something. I turned

around and saw — Well, I don't know what I saw cause I freaked out. I thought it was a dog, but I think I saw a hand or arm in its mouth. I still can't remember straight. Dogs don't make me crap myself, though. But doing my laundry wasn't half as bad as what happened next.

I ran out of the alley and across the street, bouncing off a parked car and landing on my ass. Yeah.

I heard this crazy laugh from the alley. Like a chick, but insane or something. Then two guys came out of the bar and went to the same spot, to piss, too, I guess.

I knew I should warn them, but I couldn't do anything at first. Then I saw the Cannon's sign change. I swear it spelled out "Save the innocent," but then it was normal again.

I felt that kind of shiver you get when you were a kid playing hide and seek. My buzz, the fear, it all went away and I stood up.

"Don't go into that alley, you dumb fucks!" I yelled.

The two kids with their stupid baseball caps looked at me like the drunk I was. One of them said something and the other laughed. That's when the Thing came out of the alley. They took one look at it and ran like girls. Probably shit themselves, too.

She didn't like that. I say she, even though I don't know for sure. But it had tits — lots of them, like a dog, but she looked kind of rotten. I don't know.

She started coming at me. I guess she was pissed that I made those kids run off.

She made it about halfway across the street when I said something like, "Get the fuck away from me!" and the damn thing stopped. Something came over me, Dana. Maybe something came to me, but I wasn't surprised when it happened. She sure was. It was like she couldn't move, even when the truck's high beams lit us both up.

I can say we were both surprised when Archie ran her over. Twice. Then he got out of his truck and hit her with a hammer like she was a bass. He didn't even stop smoking. Like I said, he thinks he's Dirty Harry.

I don't remember what Archie said, but he saw what happened. He yelled at me to help him load the body into the bed of his truck. We covered it with a tarp. He nailed a gutter spike into its chest. "Just to be sure," he said. His hands shook when he did it. I just puked.

He gave me a ride to my place, but he made me ride in the back, because of the shit and all. I still remember the tarp over the thing and the bloodstain growing bigger. What was worst was her hand. By the time we got to my place, I think it looked human.

I puked a lot that night.

TUESDAY, JUNE 4

Archie stuck around for a couple days after we got rid of the body, and taught me a few things. I learned how

to put on my "spirit eyes." He explained that they do more than just help you to see things, but give you strength. I don't pretend to understand, but something happens when I concentrate on it. Archie told me my spirit eyes are what let me stand up to whatever I saw. He said I was "chosen," and that we could see stuff, monsters, I guess, and stand up to them. He has another name for it in Cherokee, but I suck at that.

He put me through my paces, trying to get me to do all kinds of crazy shit like a drill sergeant. I never could get the hang of what he showed me, or make Stop work on him, but later I found out that I could do it to other things. He's saved my life, but Archie has a way of not being a friend, keeping you at a distance. Every time I thought things were getting friendly he started talking about me being a "white," making fun of me for not knowing what was going on in his "haint war." Stupid shit like that.

I was honestly happy to see him go. He gave me a number where I could leave a message for him if I saw something. He told me to call from a payphone and never to use our names or addresses. He said he'd recognize my voice. Whatever.

THURSDAY, JUNE 6

At first, I was scared shitless we were going to get arrested, but nothing happened.

I went back to work. Every once in a while I tried to do what he showed me, but never saw anything. So, Archie called me. Told me there was some weird shit going on in Greenville, SC. There's a huge graveyard there just off highway 25 between it and Asheville. Archie heard from one of his dealers that some mules (drug runners) had gone missing around there and the rumor was that only parts of them were found.

It was all fucked up. Archie brought in another guy called Childe, a biker dude who could make shit smoke while he held it. I've seen Archie do something like that. You would expect a biker named Childe to be some big fat fucker, but he was a tiny dude with a kid's face. He could fight like Archie, though.

In the end, he didn't help.

We got caught in some kind of turf-war in the middle of the damn graveyard. Childe got shot. We were hiding behind a tombstone. Childe was sure one or more of them was a monster. I knew we had to sort the shit out quick so, I don't know, I kinda' prayed that I could put on my spirit eyes. Then, bam I could see them. There was one on each side, telling their guys to get each other.

Suddenly those two went from not seeing me to both looking right at me. The normal folks didn't seem to notice, but the two things were looking at me like deer in headlights — except I could tell they wanted to kill me. Headlight. That's what we decided to call it later.

The boys the things had brought were trying to figure out what the hell was going on when Childe suddenly yelled something like "Freeze, Greenville PD!"

Pretty smart for a biker. The homeys ran for it, but the dead guys didn't.

One of them wouldn't Stop when I tried it, but Archie was ready. Childe was bleeding bad. He didn't make it to the hospital.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12

Haven't written in about a week. Kind of fell off the wagon I guess. Something happened today. I was mowing by Marcher Hall, the new med building, when I felt one of those again. I ran right the fuck over some flowers that another crew had just planted. Never had the shivers at work before. It was midday so I killed the engine and got off as if to check out the damage. I turned on my spirit eyes and looked around. Nothing except a FedEx van pulled up at loading dock.

The guy who got out of it seemed normal. Maybe the mower just gave me the shakes.

You know, even if you guys don't read this, it would probably be good for me to write this stuff down anyway so I have some kind of record, like folks do on those cop shows. I've decided to hide this book in my apartment, just in case.

THURSDAY, JUNE 13

I was wrong. I went back last night and something is definitely going on at Marcher. I used my spirit eyes again but this time it was different. It wasn't that I saw one of the things. I didn't see anything, but the loading bay door at the back of the place was cold, weird cold, like someone left the refrigerator open. Cold just poured out of it! I couldn't find a way in, but most of the keys are standardized at the university. I figure I'll talk to Mel and see if I can find out the key's number, and then I'll lift one.

Oh, I was going to tell you more about Archie. He's a drug dealer, well, a pot farmer. He and some friends grow it up in the mountains and sell it down here. Says that it's the #2 cash crop in NC. Archie does his business away from home — both pot selling and monster killing, I guess. Says he doesn't want to attract attention to his family or tribe or whatever. He has a couple of dives around the southeast, cars with in-state plates.

MONDAY, JUNE 17

I was eating a sandwich at the café by the law school when I saw the front page of the faculty paper. Check it out. I'm going to watch Marcher Hall again tonight after I meet up with Archie at the bar.

He's in town unannounced. Said that there was no dope business or haint stuff and is just passing through. Oh well, it'll kill another night, and Archie

usually loosens up and tells me more about the war after our second pitcher — and after I let him win a game of pool.

I won't tell him about Marcher yet. He'd probably kick the door in and start swinging.

BEEF COMBO!

Scientists at Marcher Hall, part of the new biomedical initiative between the University and Dnatex, have produced the first twin calves cloned from a slaughtered cow. This procedure will allow meat producers to select the best genetic materials by looking at the quality of the final product. The cells of the parent were taken from its kidneys over two days after it had been butchered in a processing plant. The cells were grown in a laboratory jointly funded and staffed by Dnatex and the University.

THURSDAY, JUNE 20

A lot of that article about the cows make sense. I'd love to have the perfect steak every night, even if it would kill me. But I was watching the news yesterday about this crazy French doctor who says he's already trying to clone a human. That's just not right.

I can understand folks who take fertility drugs, getting a helping hand from science and all. I understand wanting kids, but making copies of yourself? I've had plenty of daydreams about making it with some of the women I see on campus, but would they seem so great if there were hundreds of them?

Maybe this is what they're pointing out. That there aren't any monsters in Marcher. It's what those "smart" bastards are up to in their labs that I need to stop. Maybe they sent me the shivers to clue me in about the clones? Maybe they're wrong too, like the other things I've seen. Maybe they want me to stop the experiments before it gets out of hand. Maybe whatever makes the dead wake up can get into clones. Those idiots could be making bodies for the haints.

I've never really thought much about where monsters come from, but if they could go after cloned bodies. Well, that'd blow Archie's idea of what's going on. We



both got pretty tore up after my first real outing in Greenville. My blooding, he called it. He told me he thinks it's the fault of dead people that they're walking around and killing folks. They did something terrible in life and it kind of stains them. The haints or whatever find it easier to get into the bodies of murderers than a sweet old lady. He says that's why the things seem to be mostly in white people. Killing Indians and having slaves and all that — we're dirtier than Indians and black folks.

Yeah, and I'm supposed to be the good old boy racist? Maybe that's all bullshit and Archie knows it. Maybe that makes it easier for him to do what he does. Maybe whoever's behind all this could do more than give us all these fucked-up tricks and actually tell us what the hell is going on. That way I wouldn't have to rely on Archie to "explain" it.

Shit, I get an owners manual with a microwave! Someone gives Archie the power to bash skulls in and he has to make shit up to explain it?

I don't know what I'm getting myself into with Marcher. I'd be nice if I had some real answers. I figure I could go in tomorrow. There should be less traffic. All the students will be out partying downtown.

FRIDAY, JUNE 21

I guess it's really Saturday now. Christ, what a night! I went back to try the key. It worked like a charm. The inside of the loading bay was filled with boxes and stuff. Nothing strange that I could see. That's when I heard a huge crash, like a filing cabinet falling over, and then a woman's scream.

I ran through two swinging doors and into a dark hallway, praying that I wouldn't be seen. The walls were half glass, windows looking into offices and labs on each side. I could see a flickering light from a room at the far end. The light flashed on and off like someone was playing with the switch. I started down the hall and got the shivers again, so I looked with my spirit eyes.

There was a woman sitting in a chair across the room facing me, gripping the seat with her hands. A desk lamp had been turned toward her and she was squinting against it. Her nose was bleeding. She had red hair. She looked wrong, but it was weird. I've never seen anyone so human look like that. Other things look plain scary, and the with spirit eyes they look worse, like finding a cockroach in your cereal after you've eaten half a bowl.

There was a guy standing in front of her. He was wiping blood off his hand. All I could see at first was his back. He was wearing an expensive suit. Not a JC Penney like any of mine. It was shiny black, like a cat. And then the craziest part hit me. He was wrong, too. Way fucking wrong.

That was damn confusing. I saw two things fighting in Greenville, but Archie and I figured that was just some business between them gone wrong. But they sure teamed up in a hurry on me when they realized I was there. Can the things be loyal to each other, even when they're enemies? The ones in front of me now didn't look loyal to each other. It looked like some kind of movie interrogation.

He asked her about her "work," about her "loyalty," and grilled her about somebody named Park.

She was scared, but kind of pissed, too. She kept talking about filing her reports with Park. Named off a bunch of form numbers, from what I guessed. She was still trying to free her arms, I could tell, and the way her body moved — it was like she was glued to her seat, but I couldn't see any ropes. Just her hands with a white-knuckle grip on the chair.

The guy asked her again to tell him about her work, and Parks, and the unauthorized clones. I remember him saying that for sure.

She looked confused and started to tell him she didn't know, but he slapped her. I almost stood up then. You just don't hit women. Still, I kept my cool and waited, and was glad. He pulled out some freaky gun — all shiny and new looking. He laid it on the desk so she could see it, like a threat, I guess.

Archie would have gone nuts about then. But all I had was a can of mace in case of a guard dog.

She was crying, saying that she'd take a lie-detector test.

The guy laughed, real freakish. He said his "mission" wasn't about her "truth" but damage control or something like that, and something about her being "recycled."

I think that's when we both realized she was going to die. I guess that's when Archie would have left or let the guy kill the girl and then killed the guy. I couldn't do that.

The guy put his hand back in his pocket and that's when I rushed the door. He whirled around for the gun on the desk. I hit him hard and could tell he was tough, like a secret service agent or something. He had to be ripped. It felt like I hit a wall. Still, I managed to knock him down and ended up on top of him.

He was completely surprised at first, like I had come out of thin air. I grabbed for his wrists and for a second and thought I had him. Then it was like I was sitting on a mechanical bull. He threw me across the room. I hit the half-open door and slammed it shut.

I wasn't out exactly, but it took me a few seconds to clear my head. He stood and looked at me like I was a



bug. He had blue eyes, white teeth and a perfect tan. I hate getting my ass kicked by pretty boys. He sighed and reached for his gun.

But it wasn't there.

Whatever was pinning the girl to the chair had broken or she got out of it or something. She had the gun. I could tell she almost thought about pointing it at me, but she didn't. She had it on the guy. He lost his smile for a second, but it came back. He had a lot of teeth.

He told her that he would speak for her, that they could work something out — something about it being Park's fault really, that they needed to deal with me. She looked at me for a second and then he moved damn fast. He was diving at her before I saw what was going on. He tackled her and came up with the gun, pointing it at me, still smiling.

I had just managed to get up and couldn't see the girl. She was still behind the desk. I held out my hand and yelled, "Get the hell away!" I felt the Stop thing pour out of me like little pinpricks.

The guy stopped short and then crashed back into the desk like I'd just shoved him. He looked at me angry, like I'd just scratched his fucking Porsche.

He called me a "deviant" like I was some kind of fag or child pornographer. Then he pulled the trigger. I flinched, but nothing happened.

That's when I noticed a little green dart pinning his tie to his chest. I saw something like surprise register on his perfect fucking face when he looked down and saw it too. I guess he thought he had smooth-talked the girl out of shooting him when he jumped her.

He pulled the dart out and tried coming forward, but I think my Stop still held him. I don't know what was going on. I thought that gun was a cannon the whole time and it turned out to be a dart gun. I figured he'd be knocked out pretty soon, but a dot of blood appeared where the dart stuck in him, and got bigger and bigger. He tore his shirt open and I could see that his skin was bubbling. Smoke started coming off his chest and out his nose and mouth. He freaked and tried to run to the windows, but it was like he was melting. He just splashed on the window. I have to hold back from puking just thinking about it.

In a few seconds, all that was left of him were his clothes. It was like the rest of him was oozing to the drain in the floor. God, I lost it.

The girl stood up after a second. We stood there in that wrecked room and didn't say a thing. I got a better look at her. She had a round face. Kind of red-auburn hair. Green eyes. Good-looking. Smart. Wrong. I was wiping up puke.

She thanked me, and then broke down. I forgot about the wrongness and hugged her. I didn't know what the hell she was. What the wrongness was supposed to mean, but it felt real good to get a hug from someone, a freaking thank you for once, especially from a beautiful woman.

I may have made a bunch of mistakes, but it was the right thing to do.

Even though she was still crying, she asked me a million questions. Who I was, who sent me. I think she thought I was a campus cop or security guard at first. I couldn't focus on what she was saying. I couldn't keep my eyes off the body, or what was left of it.

Archie taught me to search a place after dealing with things, for anything you dropped, and then to get the hell out before the cops showed. I wasn't sure how much noise was made. There was a hell of a mess, but nothing that should lead to me, except maybe the door handles I touched on the way in.

He also told me that witnesses aren't usually a problem either. People are scared shitless and don't remember things right. Shit, I have that problem. But I guess you can't count on that happening. The best thing is to just get the hell out ASAP after you try to get rid of any evidence.

I couldn't decide what to do. I knew, I know, she's wrong, but what the hell does that mean? It they wanted me to be a puppet, why didn't they just write "Kill me" on her forehead instead of just giving me the willies?

I decided to bail. I turned to leave, but she grabbed my shirt. She held out her hand. I took it and saw something pass over her. Maybe she recognized me, I don't know. She told me her name. Shannon Am-something. She was a technician. I told her my name, too. I don't know why.

Then we lied to each other.

She told me she was a graduate student working at the lab. Her boss, the "Dr. Park" the guy was asking about, called her in to help with the calves. When she got there, the guy in the suit jumped her.

I told her I was just a groundskeeper who happened to be walking by a locked building at 11:30 on a Friday, and happened to hear her scream and happened to have a key. Okay, I left out the key part.

We stared at each other after the lying was done. I knew she had seen me Stop the Suit. I have no idea if she knew that I knew she was wrong. But I could tell she was trying to add it all up.

I said I'd help clean up. I didn't hear any sirens, and the campus police would have been all over the place by then if someone had called. So they didn't know yet. I suggested that we check out the building to make sure nobody else was around, then get rid of the guy's clothes and get the hell out.

It seemed reasonable at the time.

She nodded and smiled but said "they" didn't give up. She was screwed unless she could prove her innocence. Then a "monster" did something that I never would have expected. She told me to go. She said that I still had a chance to stay out of it. She told me to forget it all. To never talk to anyone about what happened. The whole time she was looking at me like she could see right through me.

I hadn't saved her at all. She was still caught. I told her I was staying and we needed to make sure no one had heard anything.

She said we didn't need to look. She went to a computer and a map of the building came up, all color-coded, showing the floor, I guess. She typed something and two little dots appeared. One had a question mark and the other had her name and a bunch of other info. Off in one corner were two more dots labeled DNX#1 and DNX#2. I asked her who those were. She said the calves. She hit some other keys. Maps came up for other floors but they showed nothing, except for one of the basement. I didn't even know the building had a basement.

In one of the rooms was a red dot and something like "Director H???? Park." The numbers on him were all zeroes. Shannon said flat-out that he was dead. There were three others that read SUB1, SUB2 and SUB3. I asked what they were and she told me they were more clones. I didn't think of it at the time, but I guess she meant more calves.

She pulled on some rubber gloves and fished something like a metal cigarette case from the Suit's coat pocket. She opened it, took out more darts and loaded the gun. I was worried at first that she was going to shoot me, but she didn't. She led me through the room with the calves to a bare wall. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed in a really long number. "Who the hell are you calling?" I thought.

Suddenly one of the wall panels slid back — it was an elevator. Jesus, what kind of place was that? I started to follow her inside but she told me to wait. I got pissed, but she told me that the security down there was a lot more sophisticated. She wouldn't let me go with her, so I waited. Dumb, I guess. I took the chance to look at the calves. They were normal, I thought. They had those little stick-on pads like they have in hospitals for monitoring vital signs. They were tethered to the bars of their pens with leashes

and I could see that there was a door leading out to a big pen outside.

After a little while, I heard the elevator and Shannon came running out with a laptop and a gym bag. She yelled for me to get out. I said something about picking up the guy's suit, but she shook her head and said it wasn't a problem. That she'd started a fire or something. Did it have to go that far? What was she hiding? I was in too deep, though.

She wanted to go, but I couldn't leave the calves. I'm no tree-hugger, but I felt real bad about leaving them there to die. Smoke started coming from the elevator wall.

She was pulling me, but I had an idea that might throw them off us. Pretty clever for dumb redneck, I think.

I grabbed a big, black marker off the table and pulled the calves out into their pen. I guess they were used to being led around. I wrote "Stop playing God with us" on the side of one of them. With any luck the cops or whatever would think some animal rights freaks had burned the place down.

SATURDAY, JUNE 22

I don't know what to do. I decided to write this down. Maybe then I can sleep again.

I took Shannon to my place. I gave her my bed and crashed on the couch. Didn't sleep much, though. I turned the radio to a local channel and waited for the news. The first came in reporting the fire. I really couldn't sleep after that. I looked in on Shannon and she seemed asleep. The gun was beside her. So was a bottle of pills.

I put my eyes on and she was still wrong. I just had to know more. I came in and called her name. She didn't answer. I kind of felt guilty about it, like I should have asked her permission, but I put the Headlight on her.

She was beautiful, perfect, but mannequin perfect. Plastic. Her skin and hair were silver-gray, like someone out of those old black and white movies.

She stirred. I shut it off and backed out of the room.

Why are there beautiful monsters? Why are there monsters that have bad dreams? Monsters who need to take pills?

SUNDAY, JUNE 23

They wanted me to work overtime today, but I called in sick. When Shannon got up she told me that was a mistake, but I was too tired and hung over.

She wanted to leave, but I told her to sit tight for 24 hours. She finally agreed. I asked her again about the guy in the suit and the others she mentioned. Was there someone who could help against them? She said the folks she worked for, the big bosses had probably sent the guy. Probably something Park had done. Most likely they're going to send someone else to look for her. She

left her car in the parking lot. If they can't find Park and her in the wreckage, they'll figure out she didn't die in the fire. They'll come looking.

I looked past her into the bedroom. Her laptop was open and there were some other computer things hooked to it. She told me she had some of Park's files. I asked what she was doing, and she said she was hoping to find enough information to clear her name — or at least find out what was going on.

She thanked me again and closed the door. I heard her open the pill bottle again.

The paper printed a picture of the damage. The med building went up like a freaking candle. Burned down to the foundation. What kind of fire was that? The EPA's out there to make sure the smoke pouring off of the place isn't toxic. They've shut down half of south campus just in case.

The afternoon news reports started out good for us. One of the local papers ran a picture of the cows and the message. They said a lot of pro-animal groups have spoken out against cloning and stuff. They even interviewed a local activist from campus. Typical nose-ringed weirdo. The guy claimed to morally support the action, but that his group doesn't support breaking the law.

Tonight started out good. I ordered Chinese, got some beer and we talked. We talked about our lives. We really don't have that much in common. But for a while we were just two people and that was good.

I don't know if I was trying to impress her or if it was the beer, but I told her about some of the things I've seen, about Archie. She was kinda surprised, but interested. I guess she had to believe after everything that happened. She asked me a lot of questions, but I just felt dumber and dumber when I couldn't answer them, and I could see it in her eyes. She knew I didn't know shit about what I was doing or how.

She opened up a little, too. Told me that she worked for an organization that did a lot of the same things. Worked against creatures like that and tried to help folks, I guess. That they've been doing it for a long time. After seeing that suit guy, I asked her if they were run by the government. All she said was that the government works with them sometimes. The way she said it though sounded more like the government worked for them. Christ.

I guessed we had a lot more in common than I thought at first, but that didn't seem to make sense. I'm fighting blind. Why haven't these guys recruited folks like me? Archie's hinted at some others like us, but no kind of organization.

Shannon's smart. I bet she could help me figure out more about what I can do and who the hell did it to me.

I held back from mentioning anything like that. She'd really think I was crazy if I went that far.

She came over and kind of leaned against me. I rubbed her back after a while. That was real nice. I asked her again about the guy. Who did he work for? She told me he worked for the same folks. She wouldn't explain any more. I thought we were really connecting there for a while, but she clammed up. I guess I'd have a hard time dealing with my coworkers suddenly turning on me, too.

I always run my mouth too much when it comes to women.

MONDAY, JUNE 24

I went in today. I took a mowing job by the vet school so I could watch the lab. They were still pouring water on parts of the ruins. Folks are picking through other parts, and I saw an ambulance.

I risked looking and saw a guy, a wrong guy, talking with some fireman. He scared the shit out of me. I loaded up the mower and got the hell out of there. He was wearing a suit, but there were lots of them around. Administrators from the University and detectives I guess. This guy looked older than the one who attacked Shannon. I didn't want him to see me staring at him.

It got worse. The evening paper reported that the local police have new leads. They aren't talking about the tree-huggers anymore. They're talking about "Federal assistance." They're talking about possible murder — Shannon's murder and the murder of her boss. Their faces were on the news.

Shannon was ready to run after I told her about the new suit guy. I can't calm her down. I told her Archie could get us out. She's paranoid as hell. She made me go to a public phone to call him. I made it about halfway through the story until I said Shannon was wrong. I figure if I didn't he'd attack her on sight. I told him how I think the government did it to her. He wouldn't listen. He wants to meet her privately — Archie's shorthand for killing her. I told him that I promised to help her. I think the wrongness can fade. A lie probably, but I don't think this is her fault.

I don't trust him, but do have any real choice? Shannon's losing it and Archie's the best chance we have to get away without being seen. He knows the mountains. God knows we wouldn't be the first people to get lost up there.

Shannon took her bag into the bathroom and came out with black hair and brown eyes. I didn't see any dye containers in the garbage when I went in to piss. I didn't ask.

We're going to meet Archie at a diner and lottery joint on the state line and talk. He won't try anything there. Too many people.



TO BOOKWORM OR SOMEONE ON HUNTER-NET

It's Tuesday night, the 25th, when I write this. You may not know me. I didn't post much, but I'm Tagv287. That means firefly in my language, for what it's worth to you. I'm writing this for Matt, and I guess for you and me too.

At first I told myself that Matt was a goddamn idiot and he got what was coming to him. I just re-read his diary, trying to find out what he knew, what happened.

I had no intention of helping the bitch when I got there. If her haint buddies wanted to kill her, that was fine with me. I was hoping to show Matt what a complete fuck-up he was and see if there was a way to get him away from whatever tricks that woman had used on him. I never really thought of him as a friend, but he had been chosen, just like me, and he was damn useful in a fight. As bait mostly, but still useful.

I met them at Mom's on the SC state line. I got there a couple of hours early to take a look around to see if any of her friends got there first, whoever they are. It was a madhouse. The damn lottery topped 250 million so every greedy loser in SC crossed the line to throw away their money. The shavings off the lottery cards were piled in tiny mounds like green snow all over the floor. I took my time. No one was paying attention, so I slipped back out to my truck, hunkered down and waited.

Eventually they pulled up in Matt's truck. I let them go in first. I checked my gun one more time and went in with my Spirit Eyes on. I saw Matt and the bitch in the back. She was as tainted as the day is long. Not as bad as the blood-rot guys we snuffed in Greenville, but bad.

I sit down and Matt tells me he wants me to pull an Eric Rudolph for them, like just because I'm Cherokee, I know every hole and holler in the damn Smokies. I ignore him and tell her I'm not going to help either of them unless she fesses up and says what she is - that Matt and I can tell she ain't pure. How was I to know this wasn't a setup, that she's not bugged? All the questions that dumbass Matt should have already asked.

They both got pissed. I could tell she was shocked, so I tried to be nice. I told her about how I know that some normal folks get fooled into working for the haints. Some even worship them, I've heard.

Then she got all high and mighty on me and said they (whoever they are) are the ones that know the real score. That she wasn't a monster, that she was trying to help people, that she was working for the greatest good. Blah, blah, blah.

So I said she must be really bad, since the goons with all the fucking answers are trying to snuff her. That really shut the bitch up.

When they got up to leave I grabbed Matt's arm and told him to get out of this. I told him to dump her. She could catch a bus, hitch a ride, whatever. I told him that I'd hide him, but I wasn't going to risk my ass or the war on someone that the spirits tell me is tainted. It doesn't matter how nice she looks.

I didn't say that was the only chance I was going to give him.

He turned me down, and I thought I was going to have to kill him. He didn't know much about me, but he was way out of his league. He was going to get caught and rat my ass out. I wasn't going to let that happen.

I waited until they got out to their car and then caught up to them. I apologized and gave Matt a key to the Rabbit Motor Court in Carnesville and told them how to get there. Told them it was already paid for, that I wasn't staying to help them, but they could have it. I didn't tell them I had the other key.

I also gave Matt my gun, only loaded with blanks. I don't know if he knew I was up to something or not, but when he opened up his bag to put it in he gave me this book. He told me he wanted me to have it, that maybe what he wrote would change my mind. If not, he said I should find some others like us and start a library or something to exchange information. I never even told the poor bastard about hunter-net.

I thanked him, and even though I promised myself to only give him one chance, I asked him to back out again. He didn't.

I drove by the motel a few hours later and saw their car. The motel is one of those old cabin jobs. I made sure to rent one near the woods. I could make a quick getaway there.

I parked my truck behind an old gas station down the street so I could check my guns. I slid them into my duffel bag and got the golf club in case I had to use the smackdown.

I was ready, but then thought about Matt's book and decided to have a look. I checked around, took out my flashlight and started reading, cutting the light out every once in a while to check and make sure no one was looking. I guess I was just trying to delay what I needed to do.

I don't know what changed. Maybe it was guilt, but I couldn't kill Matt after that. I guess I still would have snuffed the girl, but I don't know. Maybe not even that. I thought about how I'd kept him ignorant. Not that I'm freaking crazy like some of the fucks on the net, but I never told him squat. I never told him about the net. I never told him what was really going on in Greenville. I never told him about the other one of us I knew in Charlotte. I never told him that I wouldn't have been able to kill that changer if he hadn't held it with his

trick. How I'd been tracking it for weeks and was too fucking scared to take it one on one.

Maybe all his self-pity rubbed off on me, but I made up my mind to give the book back to him and just let him go. I'd hide out for a while and see what happened. If I had to I could move on. I've planned for that for a long time now. If the spirits wanted him to die, he'd die.

I spotted the cars from the opposite side of the road. They were parked well away from the motor court. Two black sedans and three police cars. Then I saw a guy in a suit come out of the motel office with a cop, and the manager in tow. The cop and the manager didn't look happy. The guy didn't have the same Beach Boy looks of the guy in Matt's book, but just to be sure, I looked with the Spirit Eyes. He was taint.

I knew what was going to happen. I had a cell phone and guns. I could have taken out any of those pricks, but I waited for the spirits to call. To give me the fire. It didn't come. I felt nothing, so I did nothing.

The cops fanned out and the guy took the key from the manager. He pulled out a gun and put on a pair of dark glasses - at night. Weird.

I waited for the sign. Surely it would come now.

Nothing. Did the spirits decide about Matt so quick?

The guy moved fast, directly across the road and behind Matt's truck. He checked inside. Careful, this one. He looked up and made sure the cops were watching. I guess they were expecting him to call out some kind of warning. Instead, he just went to the door

and put in the key. I can't believe they didn't hear anything. I saw him in the open doorway and heard a gun go off. I think it was the one I gave Matt. Maybe he realized what was happening too late. Then I heard three more louder shots.

The girl was crying when the suit led her away. He put her in one of the black cars. Someone was there waiting for her. All of them were taint, but I could swear the girl was just a lightning bug next to a couple streetlights. Then the car took off down the road.

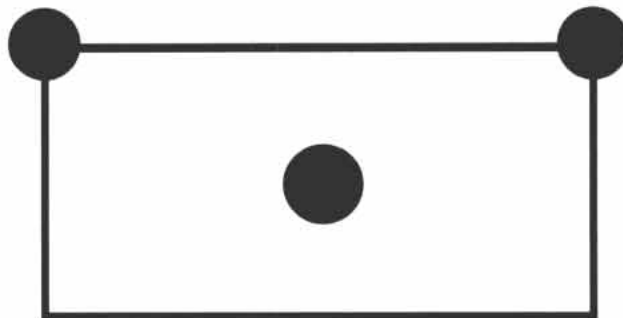
The freaking cops roped the place off while the suit picked something up. His shells? One of the cops started screaming at him. The suit put his hand on the guy's shoulder and the cop calmed down. The suit smiled.

I waited through the morning as the news crews came and left. I waited for the suit to leave. It wasn't until late today. So I followed him back to the highway and to the Hi-Way Motel in Commerce.

I went to a restaurant where I could keep an eye on his car. The TV there had a story about Matt, about how a University groundskeeper had been killed in Carnesville. How he had killed a scientist and kidnapped a University worker - burning down a building to cover things up. She was expected to make a full recovery.

I'm going to go check into the hotel and try to get some sleep. Then I'm going to deal with that guy.

I've been planning to run for a long time.





CHAPTER 4: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless.
— Proverbs 14:16

DISCOVERY

From: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

To: lubrecht@houseserv.net

Subject: Strangers

Consul Lubrecht:

I'm sure by now you know what happened to Gustav. I'm tired. I just came from the hospital. Terrible places, hospitals. Centers for pestilence and death. Managing to improve your health inside those walls is fortunate if not miraculous. Gustav didn't receive such a blessing. He died around 3:30 this morning.

He was a fine man with a big family. Sometimes he had a hard time letting our "war" against the consensus go, and I think he resented the bulk of humanity for being so ignorant. But it never clouded his judgment, and perhaps we should have done a better job pointing him in a different direction. The people who murdered him — this is now the third instance of these strangers that I've come across. I feel an extreme sense of dread regarding these bizarre individuals. The first, you know, was the school teacher who killed the new apprentice, the Crown boy. The second was a man named Gansfeld, whom I'll tell you about in a moment. The third involved the four teenage boys who beat Gustav to death

using socks full of rolled-up quarters. When I found him he was bruised and bloody, and surrounded by coins.

I took him to the hospital and eased the pain in his mind with a brush of his senses. I called Fredrick Tenwick, not a member of our Order but a healer who did some work for me about two years ago in Vancouver. A strange man, but safe and sane and that's all I can ask anymore. Tenwick couldn't heal him. Understand, now, that I've seen Tenwick concentrate and make a sucking chest wound disappear. Yes, there was a small backlash in the process, but I paid him in spades for his services so everything was even in the end. He said Gustav's wounds were too terrible. That they resisted his efforts, like some of the injuries caused by our own magic. The internal bleeding couldn't be stopped. And so, my student is dead.

Three of the four who killed him are still at large. I found the fourth this morning and punished him accordingly. He was a seventh-grade boy. The others, he claimed, were of similar age. He was asleep in a room full of horror-movie posters and drawings of strange symbols on the walls. His knuckles were bruised and freshly scabbed. I woke him and we had a talk. It didn't take me long to discover that there were others like him. After a calm discussion, he pointed me to a site online, some place called the Hunter's Net. Beyond that, this child was unlearned and didn't have a shred of pertinent

information. He was terrified and angry. I wouldn't be surprised to hear of him in school with a deer rifle in a week. So I tried to wipe his mind, but for a minute there I couldn't even find his consciousness. It was like searching in a fog for something small. I concentrated and pushed myself (which shouldn't have been necessary for some middle-school imbecile). I finally found him and cleared everything out. Tabula rasa. Clean slate.

I tried to go to this Hunter's Net. Turns out it's called hunter-net, but that's about the only information I could gather. I went there, answered some face questions about my political beliefs and notions about "conspiracy" and "the supernatural" and was promptly kicked to some search engine. I tried again and found myself connected to some pornographic toy store. It's either broken or I don't know the proper way inside. I don't know much about computers — I can get online and update my Acrobat Reader, but beyond that I'm fairly illiterate. But I didn't see any password window come up. I even tried answering the questions in different ways, different combinations to see if I could "unlock" the access somehow. Nothing happened.

So, I come to you to let you know that this has gone too far. I do not believe we are dealing with some flash-in-the-pan here. These pawns are out there, and they have seeming capabilities akin to our own, but weaker. Yet they don't act like hedge magicians, fooling slot machines or turning Tarot cards. These people are fearsome and devoted. I'm going to find out more. Call it a fact-finding mission. I'll find out who they are and who controls them. I believe this web site might provide some crucial insights. I'm going to break into it. Not by my own hand, but I'll use strictly in-house personnel. I don't want this getting out to the others. They squabble like pigeons over breadcrumbs.

Two things before I close. One, I know I'm supposed to "ask your permission" regarding this, as you're one of the higher-ups now and I'm not quite so high-up, but we've known each other for how long? We used to be in the same cadre under the eye of Tutor Lucon, and with all we've been through, I suspect you can throw me a bone.

Two, I said I'd talk about the second of these whatever they are, the one called Gansfeld. There's very little right now I wish to say about him other than he was outside the norm of what I'm finding. He had no violent urges. He was neither ruthless nor insane, and was generally an interesting man. He gives me pause before declaring war wholesale on these pawns, because if he was capable of an almost enlightened outlook, others may be as well. Time will tell, I suppose. Regardless, Gansfeld has been dead for two months now. It seems I am surrounded by death. A trend I hope to overturn one of these days.

Lily Freewell
"Medea"

Gilded Lily,

It's stupid and childish, but I am very much going to miss you. You just left the room a half-hour ago, but I can still smell what ever hand cream you use. It has a very nice scent.

It's funny, you know, so many of my friends have died so violently at the hands of "enemies." The doctors call my enemy "heart disease." Who knows? And here people tell me I have a big heart. Irony is alive and well, it seems, quite unlike me.

I just wanted to thank you for sharing a small piece of your life with me and letting me do the same. I've heard some pretty unpleasant names for your kind, but none of them seem to apply to you. I did not find you manipulative or cruel or even all that strange. I know you use nice-smelling hand cream. I know you have a fish tank filled with those kissing fish. And I know that in the morning I love the way strands of your black hair fall down your forehead and rest between your eyes. I'm kind of a foolish old sentimental that way, as you know by now.

Anyway, I know you're not coming back to visit me. I know you have a life of your own, so get to it. This letter will find its way to you, I'm sure, as you always seem to be a very lucky lady.

See you on the other side.

Euthor Gansfeld

To: amilieu@beliefweb.com; Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

From: jscott-help@verdantcorp.com

Subject: Re: Strangers

Lily:

Lubrecht FWD'ed your message to a few of us. Listen, I understand what you're trying to do. These people you're talking about, it's weird, I know. I've met some of them (at least, I think I have) down at the shelter. These blokes aren't so bad is the thing. They're a little paranoid, but all they want is to ask some questions. They come back about once a week. Have for a few months. They come during dinner, talk to some of the homeless, make sure everybody's doing alright. Look normal. Talk normal. (Funny thing, they have these sort of gang signs or something that they draw on their hands with ballpoint.) It's like they're just seeing if everyone is safe, you know? Totally harmless, and as I said, they only ask questions. And that's a good thing, way I see it. Questions are what we want people to ask. Their minds are open. Their willingness to learn about what we do is astounding, not frightening. If only more people were this interested, maybe we could get back on track with that whole "enlightening the masses" business we supposedly abandoned. These folks are just people, they look like you and me, and I think you're making a big mistake. I understand about Gustav. He was a promising disciple. But please, Lily, don't persecute these people.

John Scott

Subject: Re: Strangers

From: amilieu@beliefweb.com

To: Medea (lily@houseserv.net),

jscott-help@verdantcorp.com

JS/Medea — John, I like you but you always were a naïve prick. These guys aren't the softerside of Greenpeace.

They're not out to save the world and feed the Ethiopians. Lily's right, they belong to someone. They're not "just people," and whoever these pawns are who are coming down and getting in your grill, you'd better keep three eyes open and watch your back. I'm not going to come down there and save your butt when they come for you. These days, we all have to learn to take care of ourselves. I already know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm a reactionary and always have been, and you're right. I've been known to speak (and act) without thinking, and tact isn't exactly my best trait. But I have proof on this one. Just ask Bovingdon.

If you don't remember Bovingdon, he was one of Piotr's boys in Baltimore. They were antiquities men. He had about four or five of us down there with a handful of acolytes to boot. He was responsible for shipping some of the House's more tender artifacts, which I'm sure you've seen. Every Thursday night, Piotr took his boys down to some faux-Irish pub close to the Aquarium. They'd take a corner table, get tanked on light beer and talk about synchronicity and dead languages and string theory and a bunch of other ultimately meaningless shit. They didn't hurt anyone. They wouldn't hurt a fly. Of course, they're all dead now, except Bovingdon.

Way he tells it, they were sitting there, minding their P's and Q's when some big African mother comes out of the kitchen with a freaking assault rifle and starts spraying that whole back corner. Bovingdon and two

others (Pasquale maybe?) were up at the bar when it happened. They watched as a few acolytes and Piotr got popped. A few others scrambled away as this headcase jerked the gun around and started blowing away random people! You know as well as I do that even with our bag of tricks, there's not much you can do when a bullet is coming at your head at 1100 feet per second. So Bovingdon and a few who didn't get nailed made it outside as the guy was in there making Swiss cheese of the customers. What happened then? There was another shooter. Somewhere up high. Pop, pop, pop. Three heads, three dead. There might have even been a third shooter up there, too. And on a crowded city street, no less! Bovingdon did a stupid thing, but it was the only thing he could do. He jumped behind a parked car, blinked out of there and put himself back at his apartment. Of course, now he's got other complications. All his clocks are running backward and his mind has gone to shit, but at least he didn't get lead poisoning.

And before you even say it, I know you're wondering why I think these guys are like the guys Lily's talking about. Two things. One, and this is pretty cracked, but Bovingdon said he heard the headcase say to someone "Your manipulator war is over" or something like that. What the hell does that mean? Who's feeding these dupes this information and why? As they said in that movie, someone's jamming a red-hot poker in our pink parts, and we have to figure out who's name is on the



handle. Anyway, second thing: When Bovingdon was jumping out of there, he put his mind out over the area. He found one of the snipers. Some fuck on top of a motel sign with a high-powered rifle. Both he and the rifle were covered in some strange markings, or so he said.

These guys aren't well-meaning fun-seekers. If they're asking you questions, it's to bide their time until they have you — and all of your friends and relatives — in their sights. If I were you, JS, I'd change your name and job and never go back to that shelter again. As for you, Lily, I support your quest. In fact, if I were you, I'd go nuts with it. It's our livelihoods we're talking about here.

Anna Milieu

From: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

To: amilieu@beliefweb.com, jscott-help@verdantcorp.com

Subject: Listen Up (was Strangers)

All:

Lubrecht shouldn't have forwarded my message to either of you, and you can tell him I said so. I understand his intentions, though. You need to understand mine.

John, I'm not looking to coddle these people. I don't know who they are. Asking questions is great in theory, but so is Communism. While I approve of people being interested in the flexibility of reality, I don't like them being interested in us. We're will-workers, and we work our will best when we're behind the scenes, not outed like high-school homosexuals.

Anna, I'm not looking to kill them, either. While I don't trust them (and I have my own tales to regale you with, as I suppose you've heard), I don't have any intentions of trying to beat a murder rap. My purpose is to gather information. Enemy or friend, I've no intention of going into this breach unprepared and uninformed. Someone is moving against us. These people are just tools held by an unseen hand. We've got to find out whose it is. There's another member of our order who can hopefully cater to my needs and get me onto the site I mentioned. From there, I'll learn as much as I can and pass the information along to all relevant parties. In the meantime, I'd appreciate you not forwarding this to anyone else. In other words, keep this quiet. I don't need to be hobbled by some crusty magus of the old guard or some up-and-comer who's looking to step on the heads of his betters. I hate to be this way, but if you pass this information along to uninvolved parties, I'll be knocking on your door.

M

RECRUITMENT

MEDEA: Hello, Dora. It's been a while.

DIAMND-GRL: For fuck's sake, don't use my fucking name! And yeah, it's been a while. This must mean you want something, because that's the only time you ever pop up.

MEDEA: I hate to be a stickler for history, but last time I checked, you still owe me. If it weren't for me you'd be a willing prole working for the Reality Factory.

DIAMND-GRL: Why are you throwing that in my face?

MEDEA: Because this is important and I don't have time to cajole and coerce you. I'd rather be up front.

DIAMND-GRL: What is it?

MEDEA: I need a What do you call it? A Trojan Horse? I have to get into somebody's computer. Quietly.

DIAMND-GRL: I'll give you a secure site. Go download one. It's not exactly quantum physics.

MEDEA: I need something stronger.

DIAMND-GRL: You want one with special sauce, is that what you're saying?

MEDEA: However you want to put it. You know tricks. I want those tricks.

DIAMND-GRL: Okaaaaay. What's the system?

MEDEA: I don't want to say too much, because I don't have all the information yet. Someone's moving against us. Someone new. They're capable of things. Strictly low-level stuff, but I think they're being backed by one of us. A puppeteer with a grudge, building human drones to get in our way. I want to find out who's pulling the strings. I think they have a site that's guarded 6 ways from Sunday. I don't have what it takes to get past its protection.

DIAMND-GRL: Fuck off. I'm not screwing with some magic-head and his army of slaves. I know I owe you, but I've paid and paid and never done you wrong. I'm not getting myself dead over this!

MEDEA: Dora, I need your help and I won't take no for an answer.

DIAMND-GRL: What're you going to do, get me censured? Take it to Lubrecht? Have him arbitrate? Go ahead! Do it. He'll be on my side like white on rice and you know it.

MEDEA: If you won't do it out of honor, what will it take? Name a price.

DIAMND-GRL: I don't have a price. The answer is no, uh-uh, nichts.

MEDEA: What was that man's name, the one from Porto Santo? The friend of yours from the old guard?

DIAMND-GRL: What?

MEDEA: Alvernez, wasn't it? He's a member of the Linguists, one of Catherine's proxies.

DIAMND-GRL: What's your point?

MEDEA: If I remember correctly, he did you a pretty good turn by getting you that binary manuscript you needed. And if the grapevine serves, you haven't paid him back. Word has it he almost lost an eye getting you that prize. Or have you forgotten?

DIAMND-GRL: Witch.

MEDEA: Been called worse. I have something that Alvernez would appreciate. He likes symbols of any flavor. These strangers seem to have some. He might like them. I don't think they're particularly interesting, but to each his own.

DIAMND-GRL: And you think Alvernez would want info on this?

MEDEA: Get me into the site and I'll get him the information. I'll casually suggest he consider your debt paid. Then you'll never hear from me again.

DIAMND-GRL: I doubt that.

MEDEA: Me too, but it sounded good. So you'll do it?

DIAMND-GRL: Why didn't you go to one of the Adepts for this?

MEDEA: I need someone in the House. This is our business, not theirs.

DIAMND-GRL: Give me a week. I'll cook something up. If this site is warded, I'll make something to punch through it. I'm going to leave it to you to get it uploaded into the system, though. I'm still hands-fucking-off on that end. That's your bag of gris-gris, sister.

MEDEA: Fair enough.

Subject: Proof in the pudding

From: amilieu@beliefweb.com

To: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

Lil,

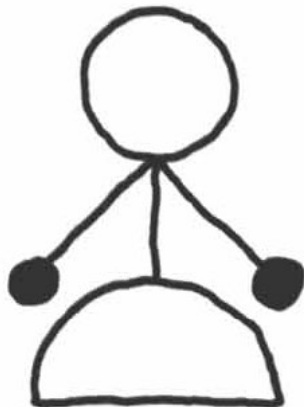
I'm not even bothering to pass this along to John Scott. Pearls before swine and all that.

Bovingdon is dead. They found him yesterday in the trunk of his car. He was tied up with barbed wire. Gunshot to the throat. There was something carved into his head, a sign, one of theirs, presumably. I got a copy of it from the police computer. The actual picture's pretty fuzzy, so I sketched the damn thing up on an El Cheapo paint program and attached it.

In the meantime, I'm not trying to push you, but these are some bad people. I hope you're getting all the information you need to stomp these assholes.

Anna Milieu

(attached file: sign.jpg)



From: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

To: amilieu@beliefweb.com

Subject: Re: Proof in the pudding

Duly noted, Anna. I understand how it is. I lost our new disciple, the Crown boy, almost six months ago. And Gustav's been gone only a month. The wounds are still fresh. I'd like vengeance, but fact is, we just don't know enough to make a decision yet. I do appreciate the image, however, and I'll forward it to one of our own who's working on that end of the project.

From: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)

To: alvernez@devidamonte.pt

Subject: Symbols/Language

Señor Alvernez,

I came across this picture. I won't bore you with the details of how, but perhaps you'll find some significance in it where others have failed. Perhaps it's occult oriented? Some long-gone sign? Sumerian? I don't have the training, hence, why your wealth of wisdom is sought. There are more where this came from if you can puzzle it out. Plus, I know it'll get you in good with Catherine and her cronies if you find something new. Every little bit counts, right? Oh, and let it be known that while this comes from me, consider it by-proxy from Dora as payback for that business in Prague. Much appreciated. Hope all is well in your end of the world.

M

(attached file: sign.jpg)

FIT'S AND START'S

DIAMND-GRL: I'm fucking done. I tried, failed and I'm not trying again. Not after that.

MEDEA: After what?

DIAMND-GRL: After what I saw.

MEDEA: And what did you see?

DIAMND-GRL: I'm on my desktop now, but my laptop? Totally fried. My headphones smell like burnt plastic and my goggles are cracked. My tech is fucked.

MEDEA: What did you see?

DIAMND-GRL: I don't even know how to talk about it. The web has a bunch of ugly tricks and I've seen some goofy stuff, but this scared the piss out of me. I went in low-rent. I didn't upload my whole self, but pretty much all the pertinent senses, right?

MEDEA: Go on.

DIAMND-GRL: Took me a long time to find the site. It was like the cheese at the end of a very long and confusing maze, site after site, slipping through backdoors and network security loops. Drove me nuts. Whoever put that thing together, it's like they nested it purposely behind other people's firewalls. One of our kind has to be responsible. But I found the in. I wish I didn't, but I found the tunnel.

MEDEA: Tunnel?

DIAMND-GRL: This thin black thing, like it was made of I don't know. Volcanic rock. Shiny stuff? Kind of like black glass. One tunnel in. Same one coming out. Most sites — and I'm even talking nasa.gov and amazon.com — have 10, 12 ways in.

MEDEA: So the site is well protected. That isn't a surprise. Please get to the important information.

DIAMND-GRL: Fucking impatient, aren't we?

MEDEA: Temper, temper.

DIAMND-GRL: I went in, and it was like the site was a dark room. Small, too. I could feel the walls close by, among other things. So I tried to make some light, right? Couldn't do it, at least not at first. It was like trying to push your thumb through a keyhole. It took way too much effort and it actually kind of hurt. But I did it. Light, nothing big. Like a candle flame. But it was enough. Goddamn, was it enough.

MEDEA: WHAT DID YOU SEE?

DIAMND-GRL: "Who?" That's the question. Shapes. Black shadows, tall and with eyes. They were watching me. Three of them were right behind me, and I could feel them staring at me. Above me, the ceiling was like a dream. You know how you just know things in a dream but you don't know how you know them? It was like the ceiling was one of those two-way mirrors where someone's watching you on the other side but your side just looks like a mirror? Someone was up there. Someone real. I don't know who, but it's &*(#&(*@ ?)/@@@

MEDEA: Diamond Girl?

MEDEA: Dora?

MEDEA: Are you still there?

WITNESS1: Dora isn't here. She had to disconnect.

MEDEA: Who are you?

WITNESS1: I am as the name implies. Who are you, and why are you trying to get into my domain?

MEDEA: So it's you, then. You're the marionette. The "man behind the curtain," as it were.

WITNESS1: Hardly. I'm just an interested party. And I don't appreciate your attempts at invasion.

MEDEA: You've got quite the bag of tricks.

WITNESS1: I wouldn't concern yourself with it.

MEDEA: So what did you do to Dora?

WITNESS1: I pulled the plug on her.

MEDEA: You bastard, she was just doing a job. You didn't have to kill her!

WITNESS1: Kill her? I just kicked her offline for a while. I'm not a monster.

MEDEA: That has yet to be seen. Your "people" are responsible for atrocities.

WITNESS1: My people? I don't understand. Humanity, you mean? People do all sorts of bad things. People do all sorts of good things, too.

MEDEA: I'm not talking about "regular" people here. I don't know who you are or even what you are. Are you part of the Reality Factory, the Technocrats? Or are you one of us pushing all the buttons? Who are you with? What do you want?

WITNESS1: I honestly don't know what you mean. I especially don't know what "one of us" is, since I don't know what you are just as much as you don't know what I am. We're on equally ignorant terms, it seems.

MEDEA: Ignorant? No. You have that wrong.

WITNESS1: I apologize. We're off to an adversarial start here and that's not what I intended. I think we both know that neither of us is really "normal," but we're not abnormal, either. Whatever we are, we're something special. We can talk about that. I'd like to know what you are, and you'd like to know what I am. Is that a fair statement?

MEDEA: Quite.

WITNESS1: Now I know you're not going to just come out and tell me what you are. Care to play a game of 20 Questions?

MEDEA: If you think that'll give you answers, go right ahead.

WITNESS1: Are you alive or dead?

MEDEA: What kind of ludicrous question is that?

WITNESS1: Do you want to help me out here or not?

MEDEA: Not really, but fine. Alive. Very much so.

WITNESS1: Are there many others of your kind?

MEDEA: To quote the Bible, we are legion.

WITNESS1: Same here. Do you drink blood to survive?

MEDEA: Okay, this is insane. First, I'd like to ask a question or two, and second, "Do I drink blood?" Do you think I'm some sort of devil worshipper? Or a vampire? Vampires are a myth.

WITNESS1: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to assume anything. Feel free to ask me anything.

MEDEA: What are you, and why do you oppose us?

WITNESS1: You're jumping the gun a little, aren't you? I'll say this much. I'm human. I breathe. I eat. I like the Internet and late-night television. I've been granted a certain insight. As for "opposing" you, I don't know what you mean.

MEDEA: I've met some of your puppets. They've made trouble for me and mine. Some of us have died at your hands.

WITNESS1: Not *my* hands. You're judging too quickly. If a rabid dog bites you, do you judge all dogs by that one? Should they all be put down because of the actions of one?

MEDEA: A fair response. Evasive, but fair.

WITNESS1: I'm very sorry if some of my "kind" have caused you stress. But I'm just as sorry for the actions of people in general. I'm not responsible, but it doesn't make me feel good when people act rashly or

can't contain their own ignorance. I'm sure members of your "group" don't act in a unified front, either.

MEDEA: Let's not talk about them. You said you have insight. I'd say the same about me. I have become enlightened. I've awakened to power. That's what I am.

WITNESS1: Maybe we're very similar.

MEDEA: Maybe we're not. Are you some sort of hedge witch? Some homebrew warlock with a sheaf of white sage and an Internet connection?

WITNESS1: Is that what you are? A witch? Your handle doesn't exactly refute the notion.

MEDEA: My handle was chosen because mythologically speaking, she was a strong woman. Her magic wasn't the point. Her innate power was.

WITNESS1: She was also a bit of a narcissist and two-faced, wouldn't you say?

MEDEA: Maybe to the uneducated eye. But just because she was capable of revenge against those who opposed her doesn't imply she was two-faced. And self-interest doesn't necessarily imply narcissism.

WITNESS1: A reasonable response.

MEDEA: So tell me about hunter-net.

WITNESS1: There's not much to tell.

MEDEA: That's informative. Sarcasm, I hope, is duly noted.

WITNESS1: Sorry. I just don't have anything to tell you other than I would seriously consider not concerning yourself with anything involving hunter-net.

MEDEA: Do you really want to learn from one another?

WITNESS1: Certainly. Learning is the gateway to understanding.

MEDEA: Then give me access to your little boys' club.

WITNESS1: It's hardly off-limits to women, but I'm afraid that's simply not possible.

MEDEA: It's very possible. Just pull the lever, turn the ones into zeroes or whatever you need to do, and give me access.

WITNESS1: It's not that simple. Even if I wanted to let you in — and I'm sorry but I don't — I do not believe I could get you in.

MEDEA: Then you don't want to learn. You don't want to share enlightenment. Walling yourself off looks suspicious, like you're trying to hide something.

WITNESS1: I'm not hiding anything. It's a similar premise to not letting someone look through your underwear drawer. It's private, it's not for you, and that'll have to satisfy you.

MEDEA: It doesn't.

WITNESS1: Sorry.

MEDEA: I will get in. I'll have access.

WITNESS1: I don't think that's a good idea.

MEDEA: Don't dictate to me. Here's some advice: Our kind doesn't like lessons and lectures from the uninitiated.

WITNESS1: Again, sorry. Not trying to tell you what you should do. I'm just politely suggesting — stay away.

MEDEA: Bad news: You're only fueling my interest even more. I'm a curious girl. You're up to something. You're the man in the control room. I'm going to get to you.

WITNESS1: I think that's a mistake.

MEDEA: Goodbye.

EXPLORATION

To: lily@houseserv.net

From: alvernez@devidamonte.pt

Subject: A Warning?

Medea:

Signs are a funny thing, my dear. Why do people use them? What is it they want from them? It is no occult thing. I find this one uninteresting, mostly. Not occult, but cult, maybe? Cult people, they like signs. Ways to identify one another. Like gang symbols in cities all over the globe, you see? If you were looking for mystical connections, they cannot be found here. Much sorry.

Also. Tell Dora no matter what you say, she owes me still. I almost lost sight in this right eye trying to get that papyrus to her. She thought there was some connection to her computer? Silly girl. But I did it. She has done nothing for me. These signs are trash to me. Tell her this. Tell her she still owes me.

— Jorge Alvernez

From: Medea (medea@houseserv.net)

To: diamondgirl42@spammeanddie.org

Subject: Debts

Dora,

Good news. Alvernez liked the symbol. He's requested more, and I told him I'd see. He said your debt is all paid up, and in fact he may owe you one of these days. Who knows? Thank you again for your help. I may call on you in a day or two. I hope you'll answer.

M

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Subject: Stories Around the Campfire

From: amilieu@beliefweb.com

To: Lily (medea@houseserv.net)

I'm just a wealth of information, aren't I? Ever since this madness started, I've been keeping my grapes peeled for these whack-jobs you're looking for. Well, do I have a scoop for you. I've got this friend of mine doing some recon work for another team on the East Coast. Won't say where, and he probably won't even like me telling you this much, but he's keeping his eyes open for some oddballs calling themselves "The Six." Here's what he said:

<< I'm not going to tell you my name or my precise location. I know Anna, and Anna says that this information might help you. So I'm willing to play ball, but when it comes

to anything outside this topic, I'd prefer that you forget what I say here. I'm not with your people. I'm with another group. I'm currently a registered nurse at a convalescent home. I watch things. I'm waiting for someone to come through these doors one day. It's been predicted, and I've been told to wait here, so I'm doing what I'm told. Outside of my instructions, I do my job and take care of the patients and that's that.

There's one patient. We'll call him Richard. There's a girl who comes to see him every day. Don't know much about her. She looks like a farm hand or something. Flannel. Blue jeans. She's pretty but rough around the edges. We pass each other in the halls and are none the wiser. One afternoon, I'm in Richard's room. She took a good look at me like there was a spot on my shirt, and then pushed me away from the bed and I fell down. I got a quick reading from her. Emotionally, she was angry and very scared. Mentally is where things were unusual. I heard a voice in her head, clearly not her own, almost commanding her. It was like a whisper. It told her that I was "not a true helper," whatever that could mean. Then a gate came down inside her conscious thought. It was like the door was open a crack for just a second, and then slammed on my fingers. It was very disorienting. The girl got mad and told me that I couldn't help Richard anymore. That if she saw me near him again, she'd kill me.

She left crying. The next day, someone else came in. I was in the men's room washing up. Next thing I knew, there was a man behind me. I saw some kind of scar or cut on his neck. He had a metal pipe, and asked me what "group" I was with. Then he began beating me. Broke both of my shins. Hit me in the head. I don't know if he thought he killed me, but he ran out. The pain was terrible, but I managed to drag myself into a stall and stay there for a couple hours. I healed up mostly. Walked funny for a couple weeks. I didn't tell anyone about it all, but I had to quit. I couldn't afford any further attacks. I have a job to do and no one should stand in my way. Anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.>>

Well, Lil, I don't know WTF is up. We have to figure out who these people are. The "voice" inside that girl's head? Someone's controlling them, dearie. Some other freak is pulling knobs and levers and turning people into killing machines. It's one of our kind. It has to be. Someone with a grudge. We're all pawns on a chessboard, but maybe these kids are a whole new piece that we haven't seen before. We have to start dicing this up, figuring out what's going on. They pop up out of nowhere. Their heads are all fucked-up. Some have unexpected tricks. They're not quite like us, but they're not not like us, if you follow. They don't look like agents. No trademark black suits. No creepy black Caddies. The Techno-bastards wouldn't use some farm girl or straight thug. Hell, neither would we. Could our old friend reality be tired of our abuses? Could these psychos be some creation sent to punish us? Who are these puppets dancing for? Maybe I need more coffee. I definitely need more coffee.

Anna Milieu



From: liber-al@notmail.com
To: Medea (lily@houseserv.net),
 jscott-help@verdantcorp.com
Subject: Zwei Pfennig

I've met one of these pawns. At least, I *think* I have. J. Scott told me to tell you. This one was a minister in the Southland, a charming snake-handler who felt he had been "chosen" by the One God Above to help people. Misguided, yes, but he was on the level about a lot of things. He knew what I was. Could see through me like I was silk. Did he bash my brains in with a Bible and Crucifix? Did he call the Vatican-Two and send papal assassins after me? No. What he did was invite me in for a cup of coffee. We drank and enjoyed it, and discussed the casual ins and outs of the universe. I did not electrocute him with ontological mind blasts and he did not attempt to brand me and shove slivers of silver under my fingernails. We got along. Simple.

Of course, I told him nothing and he told me nothing, but that's the way people communicate these days — by encoding their Nothing with Something.

But never mind that for now. I wish to propose a series of non-violent actions taken regarding these individuals. Upon thinking deeply and consulting my inner self, I have come to some theses and theories about this "group." Hunter-net, I'm told, is the name of their group, which (if you go with the numbers) you find is $8 + 3 + 5 + 2 + 5 + 9 + 5 + 5 + 2$. Totals 44, which then $4 + 4 = 8$, the symbol of the material world and a world concerned with justice and law. They are very mortal. That makes sense. I don't think they're inhuman. Consider also the Greek ideas of 666 versus 888. We represent 888, the "higher mind," an "ether mind." But they are 666. Not the Antichrist as the misguided Judeo-Christian conspiracy would claim, but the "lower mind" or the "mortal mind." Consider, though, the dual meanings of the occult number 9 (there are 9 letters/numbers in Hunternet). Nine is both a symbol of power and enlightenment, but in some minds it is a number easily swayed to darkness, representing the fallibility of our souls.

I propose that we open up one of these people. A psychic autopsy, as it were. Find out if they're connected to some larger world mind, like warrior bees protecting the hive. Say the word and I'll go find my friend the snake-handler. I'll work on him.

— Aethyr

"By Force of Truth I Have Conquered the Universe."

From: Medea (lily@houseserv.net)
To: jscott-help@verdantcorp.com,
 liber-al@notmail.com
Subject: IMPORTANT: Please Read

How many of you are in the loop on this thing? While I appreciate the sudden influx of "information," these

anecdotes are essentially nothing more than uncorroborated hearsay. My ultimate course of action will be decided by what I personally can divine using my own senses. In the end, I will be the final authority on this issue as I have been granted that confidence by Consul Lubrecht.

And, I reiterate: If I see or hear of any other people who are familiar in any way with what I'm trying to accomplish here, I will track the leak back to its source. And when I find the loose lips, I will seal them permanently.

M

CAPITULATION

From: Medea (medea@houseserv.net)
To: diamondgirl42@spammeanddie.org
Subject: Once More Around

Dora:

I know you've opted to bow out of my little project, but I'm requesting — no, forget it, I'm begging — for your help one more time. If I need to, I can go outside our organization, but then who knows what grubby hands are going to dirty things up? Remember my help with Alvernez. Anyway, since there are so few within our House that can do what you do, I'm coming to you again. This is important. I'll be sure to give credit to you when I reveal my findings to the rest of the higher-ups. That reputation alone will garner you favors you never even knew you needed. I hope I can convince you. I need you to do this for me. I'm baring myself here. I don't usually like to throw around words like "need," but you've got me cornered.

M (Lily)

To: Medea (medea@houseserv.net)
From: diamondgirl42@spammeanddie.org
Subject: Re: Once More Around

M,

This is an astounding turn of events. Does this mean you don't have anything to hold over my head anymore, like a sword of fucking Damocles? This may be the first time I've dealt with you where I don't have a pistol to my head. Who knew this day would come? Do I sound like I relish this?

I do!

Anyhoo, if you want me to get you into this evil online sewing circle, you'd better start throwing some sweet deals my way, because right now it'd take a miracle to get me back. It fried one system, got me surrounded by some spooky net-ghosts or whatever the hell those things were, and now you want me to go back?

It's time (as they say) to make me an offer I can't refuse. Take me to bed or lose me.

Diamond Girl

From: Medea (medea@houseserv.net)
To: diamondgirl42@spammeanddie.org
Subject: Offers

Dora:

You're enjoying this far too much, though I suppose I understand. If I thought prostrating myself before you and bowing and scraping and begging like a dog would make any difference, I'd do it, but I know my humiliation wouldn't be enough.

So, instead I offer you a position of some power. I have the appropriate pull with the Beckwith Chantry in Princeton. While it will extinguish every favor I've collected from the lot of them, I believe it's worth it at this point.

You'll be working with a bunch of our scholars and academics, a herd of book-fed mathematicians and pseudo-alchemists. They could use some updating into the 21st (even the 20th) century, which is where you come in. If I play my cards right (and you do the same), you'll have your own library and your own room. They'll probably even help you obtain a familiar—though what kind you might be interested in probably differs from theirs. Plus, they have a staff of acolytes, smart ones who don't ask too many questions and know how to get out of the way.

It's not the ideal starting point, but Dora, this door is open now. I can't do any better. I need your help. Please, take my offer. Get me into that site.

M (Lily)

To: diamondgirl42@spammeanddie.org
From: Medea (medea@houseserv.net)
Subject: Re: Offers

M:

You know how badly I want to say no? I'd really love to tell you to go to hell. Plus, there's a certain romance to being a low girl on the totem pole. Everyone leaves me alone. No one looks down on my talents, because I'm just too progressive for them. But who am I kidding? I have a shaved head and a pierced tongue. I practically live in my hard drive. I'm not exactly prime material for our kind. If I'm ever going to work my way upstairs and learn new tricks while I'm still young, this is the way. You're good. You know just what buttons to press. Humiliation, embarrassment, punishment, reward. I'd love to know how many people you have in your pockets. Someday we should discuss it over some beers, but I know you'd never sit with the likes of me. You're just offering me new digs because you need what I've got.

I'll get you in.

It's not going to happen right away, though. I told you my laptop was fried. First order of business: Put money in my account so I can get a new one. A big one, boosted to the gills. (I know, I know, I could just hack my way and get one, but the last thing I need is the

Technojerks catching wind of my activities.) I'm going to order you one as well. VR goggles and gloves, too. We're going to need them where we're going. Once I have the tech, I'll overnight it to you and we'll link up and bust in.

But like I said, this isn't happening tomorrow. I have programs to write. Last time I did this, the motherboard on my machine looked like French toast. I need time to get some stuff together.

In corporate double-speak, don't they call that a "win-win scenario?" You get more flies with honey than with vinegar. A lesson you could stand to learn, sister. Get me the \$\$\$\$. I'll be in touch.

Dora the Explorer

INVASION

MEDEA: This laptop is awfully small. Hard to type, so if I'm slow

DIAMND-GRL: That's how they make them these days, tiny small. Plus, where we're going we won't need keyboards.

MEDEA: I've never done this before so be patient.

DIAMND-GRL: I can't believe you conned me into this.

MEDEA: Just cool down and explain what's going on. Even though we're 600 miles apart, we're hooked up?

DIAMND-GRL: It's just an Ethernet 10/100 thing.

MEDEA: And the goggles and gloves are a part of it?

DIAMND-GRL: No, they're firewire. Faster, better—the two buzzwords of the computing community.

MEDEA: Our community as well, you might say.

DIAMND-GRL: You might rabbit, you might.

MEDEA: You're in good spirits.

DIAMND-GRL: Yeah. You did me a good turn. I'll do you one. Now remember, this ain't your daddy's Internet. While we aren't going in physically, the goggles and gloves allow us to put our minds there. I've hard-wired us a path to the server address, right to the source. This way we won't have to trudge through all the noise and 1's and 0's, okay?

MEDEA: I understanding only about half of what you're talking about.

DIAMND-GRL: Just nod and smile. I'm going to start the link-up in just a second. Put your goggles on. You should already have the gloves on. If you don't, fix that ASAFP! As soon as I turn on the sharing, you're going to see the tunnel. You'll know it. Black, reflective, like a tube of glass. I'm going to pull us through. Once we're in, I'll keep site security off us while you do whatever it is you need to do. Again, keyboards will be useless in there, got me? If you want to communicate with me, just say my name outloud and I'll both hear it and see it in my goggles. Same goes from me to you.

MEDEA: You have a program going in with us, right?

DIAMND-GRL: Correct-a-mundo. Miner49er v2.0, baby. Digs up all the diamonds a girl like me needs. It'll root around like a pig for truffles and deposit them on our systems, provided they don't get fried like last time. This time I've got some magic pizzazz going to help make sure the decks are safe.

MEDEA: Decks?

DIAMND-GRL: Computers. Learn the jargon.

MEDEA: Just get this started.

DIAMND-GRL: You got it. Starting now.

≥

Binary analogue complete

Digital wirefeed launching

W.MSightSeen97 Virus Worm Check OK!

Optical Cortex Feedback OK!

Digital Manipulation Calibration OK!

Voice-to-OCR Text Manipulation OK!

Rez-Scan Image Link OK!

<<MagiConnect v1.1 is live. Have a Nice Day!>>

DIAMND-GRL: This place creeps me the fuck out. The web is always bright, but this place is so goddamn dark.

DIAMND-GRL: Medea?

DIAMND-GRL: M?

DIAMND-GRL: Aw, shit. Did the connection work? Shit shit shit.

DIAMND-GRL: Oh no. Here they come again.

<<Initiating JunkyrdDawg Security ICE Sequencer>>

DIAMND-GRL: Whoever the hell you tall-dark-and-uglies are, stay the hell away from me. You can't get past my blockades. Hah! Stop fucking watching me. I said — *stop fucking watching me!*

WITNESS1: Who are you?

DIAMND-GRL: What? I can't see you! Who are you?

WITNESS1: Oh, it's you again. Is your friend here, too? You have to leave. Don't you understand?

DIAMND-GRL: Understand this — I'm getting a big motherfucking payoff for this job, so I'm here for the duration.

WITNESS1: I don't know what's going on. The site's going crazy. Something bad is happening! Just leave. Log off. I can't guarantee your safety.

DIAMND-GRL: Log off? Snowball's chance, "Witness One." This ain't decaf. This is some serious

<<RUN-TIME ERROR 000.AKR.540#: JunkyrdDawg has performed an illegal operation and had to be shut down>>

DIAMND-GRL: Fuck!

WITNESS1: Get out! They're coming for you!

DIAMND-GRL: Medea?

DIAMND-GRL: Who are you?

DIAMND-GRL: STOP THEM!



WITNESS1: I... I can't. You should have listened to me.

DIAMND-GRL: ITs BURNING i CaN'T SEE

WITNESS1: I'm sorry.

DIAMND-GRL: NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN

<<SYNTAX ERROR: MagiConnect Cannot Establish Binary Analogue. Link interrupted. Disconnecting from Digital Web. Please resolve SYSTEM STABILITY and try reconnecting>>

MEDEA: Dora?

MEDEA: Dora?

MEDEA: What the hell happened in there? I couldn't see you. There were just messages. Text, floating. I think I found a way to post my own message but then it got interrupted.

MEDEA: Dora?

DIAMND-GRL: gtgggggggtggggggggg

MEDEA: What's going on?

MEDEA: Dora? I can't find your mind. I can't see you. What happened in there? Please talk to me. Dora!

FALLOUT

From: anonymous@anonymous.org

To: lily@houseserv.net

Subject: Why?

What is it you want from me? From us? I felt like I treated you fairly, and you still tried to pry into our business. I thought we had a reasonable communication, that we were on the same page. For a little while there, I actually considered that we weren't all that different. Now I don't know.

Bottom line is, the security caught you this time and you left some trace signatures behind. Now I know what I'm looking for, and so does the site. You won't make it in again.

I'm sorry that we had a miscommunication. I'm sorry you feel how you do and that you judge the lot of us by a select few. That strikes me as being very unenlightened, which is an irony considering your supposed aims.

For whatever it's worth, I'm also sorry about the other girl. I don't know who she is. I hope she's all right, but I think I already know she's not. Way I see it, you must've used her or drawn her into this and she didn't know what she was getting into. Neither did you.

Well, now you know. Stay away. There will be no more threats. The game, as they say, is over.

Witness1

(Don't bother replying. The message will just get bounced.)

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: sender unidentified

Subject: Omnium-Gatherum

I'm in your system. I'm inside your castle. How does that make you feel? Do you feel violated? Like you're no longer safe? Good. That's exactly what I want. My territorial bubble has been popped one too many times by you freaks, and it's over and done with. Just as you can make a mess of my world, I can make a mess of yours. I can see you all. I'm really here, really watching every one of your words pop up before my very eyes. Let it be known that I'm tired of you people mucking about like dirty children in our business. I've had enough. This is a warning. Whoever you are, whatever small army you have together, we are stronger. Tell your master. There are thousands of us. We try to teach this stupid world of its secret strengths, and what do we get? You. Tools held by forces you can't even recognize. You get in our way, fumbling around like children. Some of you are murderers. Others are just fools. Do what you will, but we're not going to stop. I've seen your faces and I have your names. My friends will be watching you. Stand in the way of enlightenment and I can promise you that death will be a reward compared to what we can do. How would you like to be drooling, slaving amnesiacs shitting yourself on a bathroom floor? How would you like to have your identity stolen, your brain erased and MAGICONNECT CANNOT ESTABLISH(*@*(99 ^^^>

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: cabbie22

Subject: Omnium-What?

What is this bullshit? Is this another intruder on the list or is somebody drunk again? Somehow I think it's the former. Whoever you are, stop wasting our time making threats. Witness, what's going on?

Subject: Security Breach

From: witness1

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

It's taken care of. It was an intrusion onto the list. There's always the threat, but it seems to happen rarely these days as far as I can tell. The system security took care of it before it went on too long. I promise that she won't be back.

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

From: the_plague383

Subject: Re: Security Breach

The Devil and the disease are behind us, tapping on our shoulders and you just want us to close our eyes and hope they go away? You seem to know who "she" is. Point her out. Give us an address, a name, anything. Help us, don't hurt us.

REPERCUSSIONS

LUBRECHT: You disappoint me with this impertinent crusade, Lily.

MEDEA: I got inside. Just for a moment. I posted a message.

LUBRECHT: Using Dora's assistance, of course.

MEDEA: Yes. I couldn't have done it without her.

LUBRECHT: And now her mind is lost to her. And to us, which is frankly more important. It will take a very long time to get through whatever walls have been erected around her consciousness. Whatever this "thing" was that you two got into, it was very dangerous and you went in unprepared, with brazen disregard for protocol. How do you feel with that demon on your conscience?

MEDEA: Please, don't ridicule me. First, protocol is practically dead these days. We don't live by those old rules anymore. It's a New World Order (pardon the term) ever since the elders pretty much up and disappeared. It's high time we start taking charge of our own destiny. Second, don't act like you're some huge superior to me, because you're not. You're one rung up the ladder and that's about it. If fate had danced a little differently two years ago, it would be me chastising you.

LUBRECHT: Hindsight is 20-20? If I were so inclined, I could submit your name to the Council. They would be very interested in your findings, I'm sure. And you wouldn't mind the punishment that would accompany it, because it's all for the greater plan, isn't it?

LUBRECHT: Anything to say? Pondering my words, perhaps?

MEDEA: Listen. I'm sorry. I apologize for my behavior.

LUBRECHT: This was personal for you. I understand. You got too close. Since no results were yielded from your experiment, however, I suggest that you drop it and focus on more productive matters. Something a little more boring perhaps.

MEDEA: You're wrong about the results. I did obtain data from it all. Hard data, strong results.

LUBRECHT: You never mentioned that before. Why?

MEDEA: You know how it is. I figured I'd show them to the Council myself. But in light of recent discussions...

LUBRECHT: Smart girl. Tell me.

MEDEA: I have names. Addresses, physical and email. Some of the members of the site. Dora's probe pulled some raw data. Names like "Cabbie22," "Nurse216" and "Healer115." More, too. With this information, we can contact them. Find them. Do what needs to be done.

LUBRECHT: And what needs to be done?

MEDEA: We need to question them. They're accomplices to crimes against us, whether they know it or not. If we had them in person, we could make some headway on this project.

LUBRECHT: No.

MEDEA: I'm sorry?

LUBRECHT: We will do no such thing. No questioning them. No harming them. Very few of our kind, even within our own group, have reported dealing with these puppets. It's a fad. It'll probably end. And I don't intend for us to draw any curtains back to show... what? A bunch of sleepers who got uppity? What proof do we have? We don't want to embarrass ourselves. There's no reason to make others consider us impetuous imbeciles. But we can gain proof if we were so inclined...

MEDEA: Oh?

LUBRECHT: You have names, addresses, that sort of thing? It's time to stay quiet and start watching. Learning.

MEDEA: I can make that happen. I know some people, some very trustworthy people who I've done some favors for. Should I put them on it?

LUBRECHT: Certainly. Leave no stone unturned. We want to build a case against these strangers, whoever they are. Then, when all the facts are in, we will act.

MEDEA: Thank you for your guidance.

LUBRECHT: In this day and age, any light in the darkness is an asset.

MEDEA: Goodnight, Consul Lubrecht.

LUBRECHT: Pleasant dreams, Lily.



CHAPTER 5:

CULT OF PERSONALITY

"Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have labored at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror."

— Isaiah 47:12

SECOND CHANCES

OCTOBER 25

This whole trip is just un-fucking-believable.

Tonight started out great. We had dinner at this Italian place and talked and shit and it occurred to me that I should try calling Kevin to see if he knew anything about maniac bikers or cults or whatever. It would only be the third time I've talked to him since he died. I didn't do it when we started this trip because I'd rather think of him as dead than as one of those things. Am I a bad person for saying that? I don't think so. I honestly think it's better to die a natural death than be one of them. I feel so bad for Kev, but he doesn't seem to be taking it that hard. He seems to have others like him, and he's a part of some kind of club or whatever, so who am I to say? He swears he hasn't so much as put anyone in the hospital. I don't know if that's any consolation.

So that's the shit I was thinking over dinner, right? That the uptight neurotic chick could score some social points with the crowd by enlisting her dead friend to help fight these church burners. I was a regular Mary Fucking Sunshine.

So after dinner I went to the bathroom and called Kev on my cell. He was kind of freaked, like he didn't expect me to use his cell number or whatever.

I could have saved my minutes. He didn't know shit. I guess vampires and these bikers aren't a part of the same Legion of Doom or whatever. And when I asked if he could come help, he said he disapproved of what I was doing and I'd have to do it alone.

Since when is tough love part of the bloodsucker code? So that was a no.

I have no right to expect him to help me. Didn't I just say I wish he were totally dead? But it pissed me off anyway. He gets made into one of them and he still thinks he can look out for me?

The call took longer than I expected, and when I caught up with the others, I saw the last few seconds of our first actual run-in with the biker guys.

It was insane. Steven was fucked up. He must have gone after them and they decided to make an example of him or something.

I can't believe I missed it. I didn't even hear anything happening from inside. No one did! Here I am trying to get us some help, and I totally flake when the others need me. Can I do nothing right? They're going to think I'm a useless slacker. Maybe I am. I had to fight the urge to do the old hackety-hack on my arm, but I don't need these guys knowing my habits. And I only brought light colored shirts and no bandages.

Two of the three biker guys are dead. They seemed pretty much like trailer trash to me. If they were alive, I guess that makes us murderers. That freaks me the fuck out. But what were we going to do, call the cops on them?

Beyond all that, I don't even want to write about what Erik did to Steven.

Whatever. This thing shouldn't take too much more time. We're already two thirds of the way there, right? When we take on the last of these bastards who messed up Steven, I'll do whatever it takes.

More later.

C

OCTOBER 26

Well, I guess the world is safe for democracy again.

Maddy took out the last motherfucker in a big messy way. It looks like I'll be riding with her and Carson back to Yakima, and she'll give me a ride back to Olympia.

The biker guy had a chunk of change in his pocket, like \$2,000 or something. I offered it to the others, but they said I should keep it. They didn't have to twist my arm, but I don't see why Steven didn't take it. He's just being a dickhead. He needs it way more than I do.

The guy's bike totally destroyed Steven's truck, along with all his stuff. He's riding with Erik back to Seattle. How convenient.

The less I think about it the better. I'll just get pissed all over again. I wish them all the happiness they deserve.

I'm just tired of their snotty "more dedicated than thou" attitude. I come all the way from Olympia to fucking Idaho and I'm still not good enough to be part of their little gang? Fuck that!

I should have forced Steven to take the money. The more I think about it, the more wrong it seems that I got stuck with it after all he's gone through. I should have thrown it in his face and walked away. Arrogant self-righteous bastard.

Looks like we're finally getting on the road. Everybody's getting all huggie and shit. You'd think it was the last day of summer camp or some shit.

More later.

Guess I'm forced to crash in Yakima with Maddy for the night. Her family sounds cool enough, I guess. Can't complain about free food and board.

More later.

C

REALITIES

Subject: Back

From: mother248

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

The biker or cult problem has been taken care of. I'd be willing to bet that the church burnings stop now. I feel good about that. That's probably the only part of this thing that I feel good about.

Please consider this a formal announcement: Starting today, these guys go on my list of things (next to rots and animal-people) that I will not go up against. I'll deal with zombies and work with ghosts, but bloodsuckers, werewolves and these guys — whatever they are — are off limits for me. I'll help others deal with them, because I guess I have some experience, but I won't go straight up against them anymore. I'll help negotiate, counsel, brainstorm or network. I'll even buy things for you if you can't afford them yourself, but I have to think of my family.

Only a miracle kept me from seeing a good man die horribly a few days ago, and miracles don't happen enough to save us all. I know many of you won't understand, and that's fine. It's my life and you don't need to.

But if there's anything I can help with, let me know.

Mother248

OCTOBER 27

Fucked up as I am, I'm not the only candidate for the craziest in this group.

Maddy is nuttier than a fucking fruitcake and I don't know how to deal with it. All the drive she's like "My kids this" and "My kids that" and she's always talking about her family. When we get to her place, we're greeted by one old guy in a wheelchair. That's her boyfriend, Don. That's it. Nobody else lives here.

Maddy doesn't have any kids. Or a husband, either. Not any more, anyway. They were killed by dead things. She met Don after that. He's one of them dudes who can see the monsters, but can't do anything about them. I've heard of them. It was a zombie that broke his back, and he hates them. And Maddy's in complete denial. Don just plays along, I guess. If anything, it looks like she's going out at his request, like he's using her. I think Don is really pissed in general. His intensity bugs the shit out of me.

I slept in the oldest daughter's bed. Maddy said she was away for a church retreat. Except for the dust, her room looks like she only left it this morning. There's still laundry in the hamper in the closet. She kept a journal that looks a little like this one. It was on her desk next to her Bible. The last entry is way old (like months and months) and talks about how she's looking forward to spending the weekend with some church friends down in Portland.

Church friends? Who the fuck has "church friends"?

All morning on the way back to Olympia, I was steering the conversation away from her family. It's just too weird. I don't need to hear any more of her fucked up stories about what her ghost kids are doing. It's just too fucked up.

As lame as it is, I'm glad to be back in Olympia. These last few days have messed with my head.

More later.

C

THE MISSION CONTINUES

October 27: 08:00

The world is completely white. We got eight inches of snow last night and it's still falling. Could whoever we're after be doing this?

I think we're in trouble. We're clearly in enemy territory. Maybe I'm paranoid, but people are being too nice on one hand but too ignorant on the other. Nobody admits to knowing anything about any bikers, strange events or anything else. It's like they're all just wearing friendly, folksy masks. Everybody's just a bit too all-American, like a Norman Rockwell picture or something.

When we asked about the roads going west, the direction the smoke trail goes, we got answers ranging from, "I've never driven out that way," to, "Oh, there are a few places, but you can't get there in the winter. Especially not after a snow like this."

Boi and I woke up early this morning and we already went out and followed the trail as far as we could on the roads that were plowed. If you're following in our footsteps, from downtown Sandpoint, cross over 2 and get onto Baldy Mountain Rd. Pass Syringa Creek and keep going. It's just past Syringa Creek that the roads get bad. Boi and I are likely heading out to follow the trail as far as we can. While I'm unable to send reports, I'll keep these notes to upload later. If they never get posted, anyone who finds these will know where to look for our bodies.

Soldier

Test. Test.

I'm not sure why we're doing this, Diane. The two of us could be taking on worse things than we did when there were five of us in the group. And yet we keep going. Steven's pretty determined, and I guess I'm kind of determined on him. And so we keep getting deeper.

We're alert and watching each other's backs more, I think. Steven's sticking close to me. I had to tell him I was taking a leak just to go far enough to make this recording.

At this point, only a few things are clear.

One, there's only two of us and, presumably, an unknown number of them. Steven wonders if they caused this snowstorm because we're too close.

Two, the people here are not our friends. I think they're connected to whoever we're after. Ever see *Race with the Devil*? It's a stupid '70s horror movie with that woman from *MASH* in it. It's like that here, and it's creeping me out. It's so bad, I wonder if someone has tipped our target off. Judging by the guy at the motel, the waitress at the diner this morning and the guy sitting by us pretending to read the paper, I'd estimate at least three. I wonder if these guys surround themselves with people for protection, like a cult.

I guess that brings me to number three. I think I'm losing my bearing with Steven. I can't stand the idea of him getting hurt again, but I can't stand myself between him and every single thing that comes at us. He's Soldier, after all, but he's starting to be something more. For me, anyway.

Looks like the snow is slowing down. It's warm enough that the flakes are huge, like the size of quarters. If I weren't so tense, I'd say we should just go back to the motel and wait it out. We're helping nobody but them when we make ourselves so obvious like this.

PURSUIT

OCTOBER 28

I cannot believe this shit!

I checked h-net to see if Steven had made an update. All I get is a forwarded message from someone on some other list, and I find out that they're still back in Sandpoint getting ready to take care of business on their own.

Idiots.

I called Maddy and asked her if she'd seen the post from "firelight," but she hadn't. I assumed she'd want to go back to Idaho to help, but she said that she didn't want to deal with the bikers any more! What? I told her what we started wasn't done, and she said it didn't make any difference. I said our friends could die if we didn't help. Then she said her kids needed her help with their homework!

Un-fucking-believable.

I don't even know how to get a hold of Carson, and Maddy wouldn't tell me. What a bitch!

I have to figure out what to do.

More later.

I don't know how good an idea this is, but I called Kev and told him that I was going back to Idaho to find Steven and Erik and that if I died it was on his head for not helping me.

He argued with me, just like he used to when he was alive. But I convinced him, just like I used to do when he was alive.

So he's going.

We're taking Kev's car. (How do vampires get drivers licenses, anyway?). He said he'll do the driving tonight while I sleep, and we'll switch places before dawn. This is a terrible idea, but it's better than letting those guys get themselves killed.

If I remember right, up until the last few days I used to think road trips were fun. Now as I think about sitting in a car for hours on end with my dead friend, I wonder what the hell I was thinking. How will I even be able to look at him without freaking out?

More later.

Holy shit! Kev drives a lot faster than Maddy. At this rate, we'll be there before dawn. We just got pulled over by a cop and I was thinking, "Oh, shit, Kev's gonna chow down and we're going to be fucked." But he was really smarmy and the officer just gave us a warning. I can't tell if Kev was using some kind of trick, but I think he must have. I mean, the cop clocked us at 93. I hope that's fast enough to save those idiots' asses.

Okay, now that I've had my adrenaline fix for the night, I'm hopping in the back for some sleep.

More later.

C

UPDATE

October 27: 16:39

Boi put the X-Terra into 4-wheel drive to get through the snow and now we're out in the middle of nowhere. My trail is still clear, but for how much longer? We have to get to the root of this before the smoke fades. It's the only thing that's in our favor right now. We got onto Redtail Hawk Rd, went all the way to the end, branched off onto Inspiration Way and we're still going. We have to be close. Following the trail was pretty easy up until about 10 minutes ago. Boi's rig just slid off the road while going over a high drift and we can't get it out, 4WD or not. In our favor, we have to be about there and they may not expect us to already be all the way out here. That, and our approach on foot will be quieter.

The clouds have cleared. That's good and bad. The snow has passed, but the temperature has dropped. We're going to get going soon. I wanted to finish this first. I'm glad I was wearing my coat when that asshole wrecked my truck.

17:50 We followed the trail and it branches to the right again. If we're reading the map right, it's called Wednesday Lane. We came back to the truck because it's getting dark already and I think we need a break. We have the engine running to warm up the cab, but we won't be able to do that for long. Carbon monoxide poisoning and running out of gas are both potential hazards. We're going to sleep in the truck tonight. Erik has enough food here for a couple of days, but no more than that.

I'm not a big fan of the whole "shoulda woulda coulda" approach to life, but I'm definitely thinking that we may have made some serious tactical errors in pursuing this trail without more of a team backing us up. If we only run into a single threat, we may be fine. If we encounter any more than that, it would be very easy for us to die out here. We have no idea what whatever we encounter might be capable of, and I don't even have a firearm. Initiating hand-to-hand combat here would not be a good idea.

Sometimes it's hard to tell where diligence slips into stupidity.

20:36 Since we're both going to have a hard day tomorrow, we're not going to post a watch. I don't normally find driving to be this tiring, but I'm already about to fall asleep, and it's not that late. Then again, the past few days have been pretty rough.

Soldier

OCTOBER 29

Kev woke me a few minutes ago and said he was done with his shift. The horizon is going from black to gray and he's getting tired. As long as I don't look at him that way, he seems relatively normal. It's almost like having him back. It's like a dream that I know I have to wake up from. This can't be healthy. It's undoing what little healing I'd done. At the same time, it's nice to be with him again.

This whole thing is just depressing the hell out of me.

He just had me wrap him in black garbage bags and put him in the trunk. I asked if he was sure he wouldn't suffocate and he just laughed. If I get stopped by a cop, we're both in serious shit. Maybe even the cop,

too. I'll try to stick to the limit. Fortunately, Lead Foot got us just outside Sandpoint. What I need to do is find Steven and Erik.

More later.

C

ENCOUNTERS

Test. Test.

It's morning, Diane, and I think we're in serious trouble.

Either that or we've been rescued.

A lot has happened. I'll try to get it all straight.

Steven and I woke up, shivering. We were sitting there, talking about what we were going to do when a bunch of bikers waded through the snow and pounded on the window. They offered to help get the truck out of the drift. I don't think they would have taken "no" for an answer.

They didn't do a lot of talking, but they worked together pretty well. Between the five of them, the two of us, some boards and some sand, we got the X-Terra back on the road. I looked at them with the sight and only one of them was wrong. I tried to thank them and tell them that we were headed back to town, but they blocked the road. Some of them led us and others followed as they escorted us up Wednesday Lane. They claimed that would be safest. Steven wanted to start something right there, but I calmed him down a little to see where it all would lead. It's wasn't like we weren't on their turf already.

It wasn't far. We could have walked it last night if we'd kept going for another half-hour.

At the end of the road, behind a high fence is something that looks like a cross between a boy-scout summer camp and a survivalist compound. Uh... for Hells Angels.

Most of the buildings are squat little log cabins. Again like camp — or a barracks. I'd guess there are around 20 of those buildings. There are motorcycles in front of most of them, with tarps draped over them to keep the snow off. At the center of the place is a huge building right out of a Viking story. It's like some kind of meeting hall, I guess.

They told us where to park and "invited" us to the hall.

They told us to make ourselves at home. It's hard to feel comfortable in a room full of people who obviously want you dead.

Most of the guys were wearing jackets like the ones those three had. A few of them — maybe leaders — were wearing furs that looked like they'd been cut right off of animals. I checked them all out. The ones with the pelts looked different. I guess we know where to focus our attention. These guys are rough. Some of them are missing fingers, teeth and eyes.

It's not all guys, either. There are some women. Different ages. Mostly blonde. They seem to stay out of the way. There are lots of kids running around, too. Blond-haired, blue-eyed, like Hitler Youth or something. They're weird, too. I gotta bet they've never seen a public school in their lives, and a bunch of them have marks scarred onto them. I think that counts as child abuse. Some of them are wrong. I'm still not sure how to deal with *that*. What are we supposed to do about them? I don't want to hurt kids.

Anyway, they firmly but politely told us we'd be staying for a while.

Somebody rang a bell and the men and male children sat down at these long wooden tables. Steven and I were pointed to seats across the table from each other, and right next to whoever was sitting at the head of our table.

They call him the Stormfather, if you can believe that. I'll give the guy credit. He knows how to make an entrance. After everyone had sat down, two big-ass dogs or maybe wolves came in from a doorway and sat by the chair at the head of the table. Then *he* walked in and sat down. He's about six-foot-something, blond, blue eyes, long hair, bushy beard and built like a linebacker. He had a cape on, for God's sake, and this fucked up jewelry. I thought we were going to die right there. You could cut the ego rolling off him.

His voice surprised me. I expected him to sound booming — unhinged — like the first three guys, but he sounded calm. Actually, coherent and direct. He could have been a professor standing in front of a class.

I was on guard the whole time. I still am. I had no idea what kind of shit they were going to pull. I tried not to eat. There's was no way of knowing what they put in the food. But I ate it anyway. I was starving, for one thing, and it was clear that they wanted us to eat, whether out of hospitality or not, I couldn't tell. I figured if they wanted to they could have held us down and force-fed us. I don't seem to be sick or hallucinating, so I guess it was okay.

Steven was freaking out, though. He had a white-knuckle grip on his silverware. I was afraid he wanted to fight his way out right there again. He would have gotten us *both* killed. I shook my head at him and he looked at me like *I* was the enemy. After a minute, he seemed to get control of himself.

When everyone started eating, Thor or whatever said something like, "So, you and your friends killed my three men. You've made some powerful enemies here. Unless you two are ready to join us and take their place, we'll expect some kind of payment." Then he took a plate of sausage and offered us some like he'd just talked about the weather.



Apparently all the kids are his. The women are his concubines, he said, except for one who's his wife. She was wrong, but still kind of attractive, I guess. What does that make her, some kind of witch or something?

I don't know if you've ever talked to someone who's a certified schizophrenic, Diane, but their delusions can be very convincing. They believe something so much that it's easy for you to, as well. This guy was like that. I was watching out for any head tricks, but he still had this way about him that makes you want to agree with him. If he were interested in real-world politics, he might be even more dangerous.

The stuff he talked about was a whacked-out combination of history and mythology. I studied some of that in school, years ago. I'll say this: He talked for an hour and never got boring. He gave us a hard-sale spiel, like he was trying to convince us to buy in to his explanation of history or whatever. We got the whole story of some "ancient and noble" movement called, uh, something I can't remember. A weird Norse thing. I guess they got their power from Odin, and that there was once some big city in Norway or homeland that was destroyed by the Christians. Supposedly the religion there was stamped out. That might explain the church burnings that have happened, like these guys are getting revenge on everyone. It sounds like a bad movie, but I guess talking about vampires and zombies being real doesn't sound much better.

His goal — and he said this as casually as talking about the weather — was to bring back the "glory of the old ways" and cleaning humanity of its "weak elements," whatever those are. He specifically mentioned the Christian Church, and something about people living with nature. According to him, Christianity is a religion of sheep that spreads weakness and supports the masses. He stands for individual achievement, instead. He said Steven and I looked like guys who would go far in his world. It's just a hunch, but I bet his world has no place for gays. I thought I'd better not to bring it up. Actually, I've been wondering if I should stare at some of the women's tits or something just to keep him from figuring out which team I play on.

After breakfast, which was pretty good, actually, he told Steven and me that we stink of civilization and that we needed to shower. They gave us towels and soap, took us to the truck to get clothes, and then brought us here. I immediately thought of the showers of Auschwitz, but this place looks more like the shower at a campground. The place is damp, so I guess the others use it, too.

I showered and changed and now I'm just waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

Steven's done now, too, and waiting for me to shut up.

At least we have an ace up our sleeve. I couldn't believe that they didn't search the truck. Are they that confident?

So now we at least have my gun. I gave it to Steven. I hope we can get out of this without using it, but we have it. If we try fighting these people, they'll kill us. There's too many of them, right Steven.

I have serious doubts about what we're supposed to do out here, anyway. Dealing with things that are already dead is one thing, but killing people... Sure, the FBI should be looking at this place, but that has nothing to do with us. If these people are here of their own free will — and I haven't seen any signs that they're not — then isn't this whole place just some fucked up freedom of religion thing? And even if they did burn all those churches, do you kill people for arson?

So, I have no idea what we're supposed to do. But if we don't do something, who is?

Gotta go.

OCTOBER 29

Jesus fucking Christ. I'm writing in spaces for all the days now. Screw the date.

Is this the town that time forgot or what?

I know that Steven and Erik passed through, because Steven made his last report from here, but the locals say they don't remember a thing. Not when they arrived, where they stayed or where they went. I'm out here in fucking Mayberry, where everybody minds everybody else's business, but they can't seem to remember anything about strangers in a yellow SUV?

Right.

Erik's truck isn't around, at least that I've seen, but I don't know where they went. The only thing I have going for me is that when I really focus on it, I can kind of see the trail thing that Steven put on the motorcycles, but it's like one of those damned 3D pictures where you have to stare and stare before you can see it, and even then it can disappear again. Total pain in the ass.

I'm following it out on Mount Baldy Road. These people don't show a lot of creativity naming shit. It probably takes too many brain cells.

I'm not sure how soon I want to find them. If they've found more bikers, it might be better if I didn't find them until after dark, when Kev can help.

CHALLENGES

Test. Test.

It's becoming increasingly clear that it's not the leader guy we really need to worry about. It's his thugs. One of the fur-wearing guys just came over and told us that we killed his brother. Not sure if he meant "brother" literally or figuratively. This group has a pretty serious tribal mentality, so it's hard to tell. He said if it were up to him, he would have "burned" us as

soon as he saw us. Does he mean with his mind or spells or some shit, or "killed"? What worries me is that there's a lot of wood being piled in a pit in front of the hall. They've been throwing more on all day. I keep thinking it's for us, but Stormbringer or whatever is being friendly. Well, compared to the rest of this crowd. Maybe he's just fattening up a couple Thanksgiving turkeys.

He still says he blames the deaths of his guys on us, and he expects us to join him or pay some kind of debt. We told him we didn't do it, but he just looked at us like we were bad liars. I guess we are. He gave us the option of getting the people who *did* do it, but Steven and I just stayed quiet. Pulling anyone else into this would be wrong.

The guys who're putting logs in the pit are big. It's below freezing but some of them have taken off their jackets and shirts. They're built, but their bodies are covered with scars. Not battle scars or motorcycle scars, either. Looks like intentional, weird stuff — pentagrams, runes, swastikas. One guy has the sentence "Pain is just weakness leaving the body" across his back in letters that look like they've been branded on. Some of their marks look a little weird when I use the sight, but I'm not sure what to draw from that. I wonder if they're connected to our signs somehow. Is it just the same thing for them that the signs I've seen are for us?

No matter what, we're not being let go. I've thought of running, but I don't see how to get away without bringing the whole damn place down on our heads. Steven is working on some kind of plan to get out of here and bring more help. No matter what, we're miles from anywhere, and the locals seem tight with these guys. They have the keys to my truck. Are we like calves being put at ease before the slaughtered? Are we some kind of human sacrifice?

If we have no other choice, we'll run for it.

COLLISION

OCTOBER 29

I can't believe Kevin's car actually made it all the way out here.

I've been fighting the urge to take a look around, but I'm totally scared shitless.

The sun finally went down and I heard something moving in the trunk.

We're going to take a look at the place in a minute. Kev's in back taking a personal moment. Apparently, he hasn't had anything to drink in a while. Better he take care of it in his little "meditation session" than have him looking at me all hungry and shit. The very thought creeps me the fuck out. What the fuck have I done?

It doesn't help much that Kev's freaked out that we're way the hell out in the forest. He hasn't been out of a city since he changed. He says that other things hate vampires and will kill them on sight. I told him that the bikers would get him long before anyone else came along. It must have comforted him, because he shut up.

I can't believe how much I've missed him. Who gives a fuck that he drinks blood? He's my friend.

Looks like he's done with his things and gearing up to look around. I can't believe how much shit I'm in here. I guess this could be my last entry.

Whatever. If it is, it is.

C

RYES

Test. Test.

This couldn't be any more bizarre. I want to tape as much as I can, but they'd wonder why I have to keep going to the bathroom. It doesn't look like we're human sacrifices, after all. There may be blood spilled, but it won't be ours. Apparently, this is the time of year when they fight for rank. It's how they keep things stirred up, I guess. Nobody gets to slack, because once a year they all have to go into the pit, two by two, and fight until one of them dies or quits. How butch is that? No wonder they all look like brawlers. The winners are recognized in a big ceremony tomorrow night. Isn't that Halloween? Or is that today?

Storm-guy says he likes us and we can take part if we want. He's not very good at taking no for an answer. I asked what weapons were allowed and he said something like, "Any skill you've been blessed with, and a knife." I went out on a limb and asked if that meant magic. He smirked and said, "Hell yes. That's the fun part."

Given that these guys keep threatening to burn us, I don't think getting in the pit is such a good idea. But then, I guess some of these guys appreciate what we did — they've come up and said as much. Apparently the three we ran into had been high on the totem pole for a while, and we stirred the shit. Some other guys have a chance to step up. Great. Go us.

Much as I like playing anthropologist in this weird little corner of Idaho, I'd rather be on the road back to Seattle. I honestly don't see how that's going to happen and it's freaking me out.

Steven's not dealing with this as rationally as I am. He wants us to make a run for it and shoot anyone who tries to stop us. He's been good so far, but he's had it. Sometimes he gives me wild looks like he's ready to kick my ass.

I just don't see how we're going to get out of here without being burned, run over or beaten to death. We were hard pressed when there were five of us against three of them. Now there's two of us and a shitload of them.

What I think is however it turns out, we're dead men.

OCTOBER 29

There's blood on everything.

My gloves are sticky. My pen is sticky. There's blood on the page. I have to write around it.

I can barely keep my hand steady.

I'm a murderer.

Kev just

Kev and I were spying on these motherfuckers until some bad, bad shit happened.

We'd been doing a pretty good job of hiding. The fire boys were more interested in fighting than keeping an eye out. As long as we stayed back a ways, we were fine.

I don't think they're used to being watched, and they all seem pretty focused right now. There's this huge-ass bonfire going, and they're having some kind of bullshit macho fight or something. They're doing some weird shit in there, too, but I was pretty far away and the cold was fucking with my eyes and making them tear up and shit.

I saw Erik and Steven. They're being kept on a short leash but they don't seem to be hurt or anything. I hope they haven't been fucked with or something. They looked like they were kind of getting into it. At least I know where they are. Compared to where I was 24 hours ago, I've practically got them back.

That would have been easier before Kev's freak out. I need to go back and see what's happening, but I have to write this thing out or I won't be able to fucking think straight. I've already cut each arm but the chill-out thing isn't happening this time. Fuckfuckfuck.

Okay.

Kev and I just saw the biggest fucking wolf I've ever seen. In the dark it blended in with the snow. We were only a few feet from it when we heard it growl. It was like five feet tall at the shoulder. Kev swore and he told me to run.

I almost did.

I gave it a hard look to see if it was just a normal wolf. It was definitely wrong. I was scared shitless that it was going to be a changer, and that was going to be all she wrote, but it didn't change, so I guess it wasn't. My only guess at this point is that it was one of them. I could somehow see a person's face in the wolf's. It was really fucked up.

There's blood ALL OVER the GOD DAMNED paper! I have to write this down. Everything I touch is bloody!

I don't know what Kev thought. I can't read him anymore. I wanted to back away and get back to the car, but Kev said we shouldn't show it where the car is. He just started talking to the wolf, like he was trying to soothe a stray dog or something. He was facing away from me so I couldn't hear what he said over the wind, but it seemed to be listening.



Right about then, this big gust of wind blew snow right into my face. When I cleared my eyes the wolf was gone and a big guy wearing a dead animal was standing there. He kind of sneered and said something like, "I guess this is the end of the road for you," like Kev and I were pushovers or something. That pissed me off. I didn't come this far just to get killed by some dickhead wearing a carcass.

I remembered the others' description of what happened the night Steven got burned. I was freaking out, thinking I was about to catch fire or something, but Kev went back to talking to the guy in this low, calm, friendly voice, like he did to the cop. The guy totally stopped being hostile and got to talking, too. It was all like "vampire twin powers activate."

So it looked like Kev had the guy all tranced out, right? So I slowly stepped away, making sure not to distract the guy. I probably didn't need to be so subtle. He didn't even seem to notice me. I had my cutting knife in my pocket, the big one I use on my arms on really bad days. I took it out, opened it, and came up behind the guy. I was kind of surprised that it worked. I got so close I could smell him, and he didn't seem to notice.

And I reached around and cut his throat.

His hands went up, but it didn't stop the blood. He fell over and his blood melted these big red holes in the snow. I can still see them.

I don't know why. Kev looked at me and yelled, "My God, Candace, what did you do that for?" And then the part of him that was my cool, slightly dorky friend disappeared. He turned into a thing. An animal. He looked down at the bleeding guy and then faster than I could even follow he just pounced.

You know that little game I've been playing? The one where my friend is kind of alive, just in a different body? It's bullshit. He was on that guy in a heartbeat, drinking at the guy's throat, pulling his head back to make the cut wider so the blood flowed faster. God. He may as well have been eating some chick out.

If I'd eaten any dinner, I would have thrown up.

That wasn't my friend. That wasn't anyone I ever want to know. That was the kind of thing we kill. It could pretend to be Kevin. It could wear his clothes and even drive his car, but it wasn't him.

He's gone now. I have no idea how much time has passed. It's still night, so I guess not too much. I have no idea where he is. I can't just pretend this shit isn't happening. I have to get out of here. The dome light is going to drain the battery. I need to go back out and see what the fuck is happening.

KILLING GROUND

Test. Test.

Oh my God. We've been watching the fight and something freaky just happened. Some guy covered in blood ran up out of nowhere and snapped the neck of one of the guys near the pit.

He's after another one. Jesus! Who the fuck is this guy? He's wearing normal clothes. He isn't from here. Oh my God! There's.... <Kack>

Uh... God.

"This is our chance. Let's get out of here!"

But...

"Come on! I left my door unlocked. We'll hotwire the truck. Come on!"

Candace...?

Subject: Seattle

From: soldier91

To: hunter.list@hunter-net.org

November 2: Private Residence. Seattle, Washington. 14:15 hours local time.

I don't usually use names, but this once, I'd like the name to go through. Candace, if you get this, we need to know if you made it out okay. If anyone knows Candace and sees her, please let us know. Somehow, she found us up there and bought us time to get out. Boi says he saw her, but we couldn't find her again.

Boi and I made it back to his place. I'm not crazy about this constant rain, but it beats the snow. I want to go back and find Candace, but Boi says that whatever went on with her, it's over and done with by now, and going back will get us killed. I don't buy that. She saved us.

We called the FBI anonymously and said that there was some kind of anthrax plot going on up there. We gave them some names and directions. Then we told Mother248 to get some word from her sister about what happened.

This is what we've heard: They found nothing but a perfectly legal "commune" or something. No guns, no bombs, no anthrax, no corpses, no Candace's car. No Candace.

If anybody wants to go after these people, feel free. You have the directions. I could help, but right now I have no truck, no money, and no way of getting a job under my real name or SSN. Boi said I could crash here with him as long as I want. I don't know. I shouldn't even be in the country.

If you're in the Pacific Northwest and you need a soldier, you know where to find me.



CHAPTER 6:

COGS IN THE MACHINE

Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock

— Amos 6:12

PRELIMINARY FIELD REPORT

Incident: 11001101

Agent Reporting: Alexander (1010011010)

PRECIS

I have finished parsing the data acquired from Amstutz's student journal, and from the materials she took from the Marcher facility — most notably, Dr. Park's reports. I was hoping for a 95% resolution to the problem, but outstanding anomalies need to be resolved. I will therefore stay in the area to finish my investigation.

I have only been on the case a few days since Agent Brice's demise, so any of his previous briefing materials would be of great help to me. As I understand, he was sent to perform a Cleaning of Amalgam 10000111. He was killed during his mission. His transponder ceased functioning at 1:35:22 AM EST.

0:28:35 later, the facility's autodestruct procedures were activated. At some time in the vicinity of these events, the human clones and Dr. Park were eliminated as well. The exact cause of their deaths is unknown at this time.

The cloned calves produced by the mundane scientists working for the front operation, and

Shannon Amstutz, the student Progenitor assisting Research Director Park, escaped the destruction of the facility. Amstutz got away with the help of a groundskeeper for the facility's cover organization, Matt Holland. Holland demonstrated unpredicted capabilities and is likely to be a reality criminal of some kind.

Holland and Amstutz were apprehended in the Rabbit Motel in Carnesville, Georgia. Amstutz was turned over for debriefing and Holland was eliminated. His presence at the fire was used to construct a cover story that will divert general attention from our activities. See Media Edit 100101011 for details on this operation.

CHRONOLOGICAL PLOT OF AGENT ACTIVITIES

6:20: I arrived exactly 6:23:46 hours after Agent Brice ceased to function and took control of the scene, using Identity 1101110, my FBI persona. I had to polish the perceptions of two sleeper investigators, but contamination of their knowledgebase is considered minimal.

6:21: An artifact recovery team using Identity 11011010 was able to alter unenlightened reports and recover evidence from the fire that could point to our involvement. This procedure took most of the day to coordinate.

At this time, I had no information that any of our assets survived the blaze for the following reasons:

- 1) The facility was completely destroyed, leaving scant clues,
- 2) Lack of any information provided to me about my predecessor's mission, and
- 3) None of the automated listening posts I activated at local airports and motorways reported the movement of Agent Brice, Park or Amstutz.

But the fact that someone had saved the cows and wrote a seemingly rebellious message on them did not compute. Had I more assistance this may have occurred to me sooner, but there is a limit to my multitasking. (Ensuring no further corruption at the site was clearly my first priority.)

If a group of misguided sleepers had decided to trespass upon the cloning facility on the same night that Brice was there, and somehow managed to kill him, I should have found evidence of some of their bodies or of the fight itself. No evidence of a gun battle or bodies was found, yet Park, Amstutz and Brice are missing.

More importantly, if "eco-terrorists" had overcome Brice and/or merely escaped him, they would likely have witnessed Procedures and Devices. Descriptions of the facilities might have found their way to the press and any casualties would have appeared at local hospitals. None of these phenomena occurred.

PETA: People for Environmental
Terrorism and Arson?

The twin clones that University and Dnatex officials announced earlier this month escaped the blaze at Marcher Hall, with a little help from some friends it seems. One of the calves was found with the message "Stop playing God with us!" written on its side.

Police have interviewed three local animal rights groups as to their possible involvement in the fire.

I doubt that any misguided, "Green" sleepers could have overcome Brice. If so, they would likely have had more to report than a slogan written on one of the bovine clones. Brice would have killed some of them, likely in less than traditional methods.

I began to wonder if some goddess/nature-worshipping deviants might have been involved. While I have no experience with the so-called lycanthropes, I have had several run-ins with Green deviants during my postings in Germany and California.

I thought suspicions of supernaturalist involvement were confirmed after the site had cooled sufficiently to allow a thorough DNA sweep. The recovery team found evidence of Brice, Park and the human clones. I wondered if deviants had kidnapped Amstutz, or if she herself had orchestrated events.

Once again, I called for Agent Brice's equipment requisitions. When the report finally arrived, I noticed that his superiors had issued him a cellular degenerator a most effective method of disposing of bodies (and hence, the dearth of bone fragments at the site), but a device that has not been cleared for standard use in the field.

Again, had I been provided with a full dossier on Brice and his mission I may have caught this anomaly earlier. Since the device was so likely to cause contamination, it had a homing device built into it in case it fell into the wrong hands. It took some time to requisition the detector and to gather a debriefing team.

When I activated the homing device that evening, I fully expected to be heading into some kind of deviant warren. Instead, the map pointed to a location only five miles away. I cross-indexed the location with our local communication and banking databases and discovered that the gun was in the apartment of a University employee, Matt Holland. I assigned several mundane law-enforcement agents to watch the apartment. I pulled the files on Matt Holland and had the probabilities run on his likelihood of deviant associations. Based on IQ and performance, the chance was listed at 0.423% -- not statistically significant. In fact, *significant* is not a term anyone would use to describe any aspect of Holland's -- an ignorant prole by all reports. Either his was a well-engineered façade or he was unwittingly caught up in the machinations of others. As a groundskeeper, he would have access to the site. Perhaps he simply found the device.

That night, mundane agents reported Mr. Holland and Student Amstutz leaving town in Holland's truck. I decided not to stop their flight, but to monitor their movement to see if they would lead me to any superiors. I instructed my agents to maintain their distance and to

perform surveillance. They tracked the pair north toward I-85. They stopped for a meal at a crowded truck stop, and then backtracked to a remote motel.

I took that opportunity to investigate Holland's home while my agents followed the pair's progress. I found clothes that smelled of fire, and procured the pen used to mark the calf. My olfactory enhancements indicated a 93.8% likelihood that the chemicals impregnated in Holland's clothes originated from the fire. It is likely that Holland and Amstutz were in league with each other. He was almost certainly at the lab, and would need to have been allowed access by some means. I found no deviant literature, no hints as to deviant behavior -- in fact, no books at all other than some mild pornographic materials.

I then decided that making Holland the seeming perpetrator of the fire would serve our purposes best. I took some of the photos I had been given of Ms. Amstutz, along with various images from the pornography found on-site, and created a makeshift "shrine" to her on the wall of his closet. Along with the physical evidence

TRANSCRIPT OF WYGA RADIO BROADCAST

Groundskeeper Matt Holland is sought by police as the lead suspect in the fire that swept Marcher Hall early Saturday. Two employees, Dr. Huan Park and Shannon Amstutz have been missing since the fire. Sources report that Holland may have set the fire to cover his kidnapping of Amstutz. Dr. Park's fate is still unknown.

of the pen and clothes, these materials proved sufficient to convince the mundane authorities that Holland was a stalker, kidnapper and arson. Thanks to the Union, the populace easily digests such accusations.

All went as planned. I told the police to wait on issuing an APB on Holland until my men finished tracking them.

Unfortunately, the information I shared was leaked to the press before I could submit a requisition to have the story suppressed. This development advanced my planned itinerary and I was required to apprehend the suspects early. I hoped to follow them more closely, but such



leaks are to be expected when working with the masses' law enforcement.

I called the local authorities in Carnesville and used my Identity's influence to attain their cooperation. I met them at the motel and took control of the situation. By this time, the cover story of Holland's kidnapping of Amstutz was well known to them. I decided that my first priority was to capture Amstutz alive. Holland was to be terminated if he resisted. I waited until the recovery team arrived before acting.

I burst into the room with the intention of capturing both suspects. When I entered the room, I saw Amstutz on the bed. The rest of the room appeared empty. I fired a tranquilizer round into her thigh as she tried to aim the degenerator at me. Suddenly I heard a large caliber gun go off next to me and saw that Holland was standing in the corner. I had scanned the room for targets when I entered and he simply was not there a moment before. I switched the selector of my firearm from tranquilizer to high explosive. I shot the suspect three times and he expired. When I checked his gun it contained blanks.

I considered using several Procedures to correct this anomaly before the local authorities could investigate Holland's weapon. Sometimes the simple ways are the best. As a holdover from my days in mundane law enforcement, I still carry a "drop" gun in case there is a need for evidence.

I recovered all our equipment and placed Student Amstutz in the hands of the reprogrammer on the recovery team. Our authorities will decide her fate.

I ran a diagnostic on my optics and they seemed to be performing within normal parameters, but that did not explain the sudden appearance of Holland. I will have the upgrade examined ASAP.

The rest of the night was spent laboriously dealing with mundane paperwork and the press.

INITIAL SUGGESTIONS

- 1) Have taken samples of Holland's remains. Perhaps a full autopsy or revivification is warranted, if within budget. If Student Amstutz read Park's reports, her memories of such must be redacted and erased. I hope the debriefing proceeds smoothly.
- 2) Holland's gun was loaded with blanks. Discover if this was a ploy by Student Amstutz. This development is most peculiar.
- 3) Search Holland's residence and phone records for anything related to a person named "Archie." Do the same for Student Amstutz's records. I learned of this name from Amstutz's journal. I will inform the debriefing

team to interview her about him as well. This "Archie" may possess the same kinds of deviant capabilities apparently evidenced by perpetrator Holland.

- 4) I am contacting the recovery team to search the disaster site, the motel room and the residences of Holland and Amstutz for the book mentioned below.

SELECT DOCUMENTS

Here begins the most salient entries I have found of Ms. Amstutz's journal concerning her knowledge of Park's activities, the death of Agent Brice, and her dealings with Holland.

2.24

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

What a great day! I have received my first assignment. I will be working with Huan Park, a research investigator overseeing something called "Project Gordian."

I've spent the morning downloading Park's journal articles, both in the mundane and enlightened press. They are quite interesting. I'm sure my scientific horizons will be expanded greatly under this man. The glories of my newlife await!

I have not seen any descriptions of Project Gordian, but no other graduates of my class have been assigned with me. I took it from the research director's comments that this was a unique opportunity for me to work one-on-one with an experienced R.I.

4.7

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

Sometimes I just don't know what Park wants from me. Which, I guess, is understandable since he rarely speaks to me.

I have restored fetus 745b to stage 1 viability as I was instructed by Dr. Park. The sleeper researchers will be pleased. Especially after last week, when I was throwing them into fits by winnowing out the last few dozen fetuses they assumed would be viable.

I hate impeding their progress at times, but as Dr. Park is quick to point out, the plans of our leaders have been laid down for years. Minds infinitely more subtle than mine have considered the need to pass off the façade of their achievement. The setbacks and advances I facilitate lay the necessary groundwork for the unenlightened scientists' future discoveries. Enlightened science provided these solutions decades ago and now it is time to make it so for the masses.

I should feel affirmed to witness the plan in action, to participate in the education of the common man. I should and I will, I'm certain.

4.13

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

Park is good about reviewing my progress but rarely makes an appearance in the Dnatex's labs. He has not shown me any new Procedures or told me of his work. I wonder if this is all I have to look forward to with this assignment.

5.23

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

The Dnatex scientists do not know what they are doing. They have still not figured out how to manipulate the genes to ensure that all the sequences they need are activated at the same time. It's guesswork for them. I sympathize. I feel that I would be on the threshold of greater understanding were I to only pursue my research full-time, but that would mean I would have stop doing all of Dr. Park's work.

I have to admit, screwing with the heads of the "scientists" working on this project is fun at times. Five years ago, I would have killed to be among them. Now I have a different perspective. Still, most of the time I feel guilty. I guess I do not see the big picture yet.

I hate not having any peers to talk to. Park hands me my assignments or they appear on my secure email without any further explanation. It is rather difficult to get the "big picture" without any real communication from him.

6.1

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

I have been frustrated with my lack of progress and the seeming pointless acts of sabotage I perform to spoil some of the work of the Dnatex scientists. Surprisingly, Park tried to comfort me. He told me something about the hard work that lies ahead, and the rewards that await. That I should not let the progress of our charges affect my mood.

Park said the journey I'm on is like a trip on a plane. When the plane is on the tarmac, the ground crew looks normal-sized. Even just after the plane has taken off, the mundanes still seem about the same size as me, but I will soon be in the clouds — new heights of enlightened science. Park told me that normal scientists will be like ants to me then.

Building that plane and getting off the ground is hard work, but I cannot let my oldlife and its mores get in the way, no more so than the plane

should be a slave to gravity. Then he said something really bizarre. He told me that true scientists must be willing to break all shackles in pursuit of their goals.

I questioned him about that, but all he did was smile and tell me that I would be repaid for loyal service with true knowledge.

I guess we must pay our dues, and so, here I sit playing the secret messenger for the leaders — part teacher, part industrial saboteur. In turn, I dangle the carrot in front of the dull beasts pulling the cart and sometimes administer the lash. Perhaps "the blind leading the blind" is more apt in my case.

But, to my superiors, I am little more than the mundane scientists. I delude myself into believing that I am the teacher. In truth, I am much more like my masters' assistant, their agent, their servant and their flunky.

I certainly do not control this charade, and my only solace is the fact that neither does Park.

6.14

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

I was finally allowed into the "real" lab yesterday. It was amazing and horrifying at the same time. Park has other clones down there, some of which do not look human at all. He would not answer any questions about them or his work. I know that perfecting the human form is one of our goals. Maybe it is my oldlife morality creeping in, but I could not help pitying the creatures being grown in those tanks.

One of them looked back at me. It had Park's eyes.

6.21

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

Primary Investigator: Huan Park [1010011010]

Project Gordian Field Notes

I do not know what to do.

They tried to kill me. Park called me in last night and told me to meet him in his office. That was irregular, but I hoped and dreaded that he was going to show me more of his work.

As I approached from the elevator, I thought I saw Park sitting at his desk. The only light in the lab came from the clone tanks. When I entered, I realized it was not him. Instead, there was a man dressed in a black suit going through some files, seemingly unconcerned that I was there. Park's desktop, normally immaculate, was strewn with papers, CDs, memory cubes and a very old book. The man had blond hair and blue eyes. Handsome in a over-groomed business executive way.

I asked who he was and what he was doing there, when he called me by name, stood up and waved me to a chair. I sat down.

He grabbed a stack of files, slapped them down on the desk and introduced himself as Agent Brice from Damage Control. He met my eyes with "Damage Control," pausing to let the words sink in. I was already confused by Park's phone call and this stranger's appearance in the lab.

He smiled. He had flawless teeth, and I began to notice other clues pointing to his various augmentations. I had heard stories of them, the Gestapo of the order, but in all these stories they were supposedly half-human horrors. This man looked like a walking "Ken" doll. He may have come from a tank like the ones behind him.

I stammered something, trying to sound secure by asking to see some identification. He laughed and turned on the light. The rest of the lab was a wreck. Equipment lay shattered. There were papers, vials and boxes everywhere. In the center of the room were some wet clothes sprawled over some kind of spillage. It took me a few seconds to notice the vaguely human outline formed by the jellied liquid, the fact that the

shirt was tucked into the pants, that I was looking at the remains of Dr. Park.

Brice waited for me to take in the scene and then told me that my mentor was a traitor. He picked up the old book and stuck it under my nose. His demeanor changed. His lips pulled back, baring his teeth. The muscles of his jaw seemed to swell. I could almost hear the adrenals dumping their payload into his blood. Who knew what else might be going on as well? I was too shaken to remember everything he said, but he ranted about Park trying some unregulated Procedures advanced by the book's author, a deviant!

I managed to stand up and started to back toward the elevator. Brice set down the book and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his hands, as if they had been soiled. He regained his composure, but did not lose his menace. He told me that we were going to search my office together.

He marched me into the elevator. My feet hardly touched the ground. When we got there he made me empty all my drawers and then he pulled out something like a PDA and scanned the room. I believe he was looking for bugs or



secret compartments. Then he began his interrogation. He pushed me back into a chair and pinched my shoulders as he sat me down. It was some Procedure I was unfamiliar with — tapping into some kind of nerve ganglia. My legs and arms became locked and my hands gripped the chair.

I tried to calm myself down and figure out exactly what he had done when he hit me. Then he started grilling me on chapters of the book and its author, trying to trip me up. I told him I knew nothing about what Park was up to. That Park never told me what he was doing. That he, the agent, was the only one who had exposed me to this deviant literature. He beat me for a while after that remark.

I begged him to take me in. Hook me up to a Voit-Kamph machine. Have me redacted. I could prove my innocence.

I don't know if it was the beating I had taken, but I could feel control starting to return to my limbs.

Brice laughed and said he was sorry. That this was not a recycling mission. He was here to decontaminate the facility. He pulled out a gun. I imagined it was the same one that "decontaminated" Park. He set it on the desk where I could see it.

I was going to die.

Then Matt appeared behind Brice. I did not know him at the time, of course, but suddenly there was a man behind the agent, rushing at him. He hit Brice hard. The gun fell off the desk and stopped at my feet.

I bit down on my tongue and used an advanced biofeedback technique to jumpstart my voluntary nervous system while they fought. Suddenly I was free. Matt was losing. Brice tossed him across the room, but when the agent stood, I had the gun.

He tried to distract me, but when he rushed me, I fired. He was too energized on adrenaline and whatever else to notice that I had shot him. Still, he hit me so hard that I blacked out momentarily.

I woke up to Brice's screams. He was struggling to get at Matt, but Matt had his hand out and the agent was held immobile somehow, by some force I could not sense. By that time he was beginning to smoke. The supercharged digestive fluid coursing through his system was breaking him down quickly. He fell to the floor. Probably born in a vat, and died in the drain of my lab.

Matt was overcome by nausea and I could see tears in his eyes. I don't know what came over me, but I lost control. Maybe I was entitled, but I can't help but feel a little guilty about it now. I cried like the little girl I thought I had locked away. Betrayal

brings out the greatest weakness. Not strength, not unity, not control, but fear, helplessness and a desire for revenge.

I ended up crying on Matt's shoulder. Funny, that was the first completely non-analytical sentiment I have experienced in a long time. I hadn't thought of anything but work in so long. It felt good. I thanked him for saving my life.

I knew he was no prole, but he just seemed too traumatized by what had happened to be some anti-Union deviant. I cannot imagine one of them crying after destroying one of us. One of them would probably have let me be killed and then he would have tried to deal with Brice.

He was so shaken by events that he turned to go. I grabbed his arm and held his hand, allowing my helix ring to gather a useful DNA sample and implant a few probes into his bloodstream.

The DNA sample told me that Matt was an unmodified human. The probes confirmed that he had normal levels of adrenaline for someone in a fight, no pharmacopoeiaic substances, and normal primal essence and levels. The fact that I was able to deliver the probes meant that he was unenlightened. Later, they would tell me if Matt was telling the truth.

I convinced Matt to stay. I did not want him going to the police, but then he surprised me again by offering to help clean up.

I told him my name and he did the same.

He did lie to me about why he was there, but whenever it came to an assertion to help me he was truthful. He certainly had other agendas, but hurting me was not one of them. At that point, who else did I have to trust?

At his request, I pulled up the building schematics on my terminal to find out if we were alone. The only beings there were the two clones and us. Parks and his lab showed up but Matt thought those clones were more calves. I didn't correct him.

I led him to the lab where the cows were kept. I revealed the entrance of the underground lab to him, but by then I had already decided to destroy it. I convinced Matt to stay in the mundane cloning facility while I went to Park's lab. I took the gun with me.

I downloaded most of Park's files into a notebook PC and set the autodestruct. I found a bag and loaded it with Brice's gear and my PDA. I almost took the book. I have to admit I was curious, but taking it only would have sealed my fate.

I went back up and found Matt nervously waiting for me. Of all things, he wanted to save the

calves. He had come up with a crazy idea, which just might have bought us some time. He wrote a slogan on the side of one of the calves and we pushed them out the door of the lab into the exercise pen. We left by that exit and traveled on foot to his home. After about a block, there was a large explosion.

Matt showed me to his shabby garage apartment and let me have his bed, where I'm writing this now.

What will I do?

I can try to contact Jeremy, my partner during indoctrination, but I don't really know where he was posted. We were not encouraged to keep up with our classmates. That did not fit into the "full immersion" we were supposed to undergo.

I've been up for 32 hours. I have a few hypercaffeine tabs left. I'll save them for later.

I need sleep, and if not that, escape.

6.22

Student: Shannon Amstutz [0011011010]

So much for escape. I had very strange dreams. In one, I was being chased by a Frankenstein's monster fusion of Park and Agent Brice. It chased me all through the facility. It kept getting darker and darker as the creature closed. Then I saw Matt carrying one of those old hurricane lamps, except a thousand times brighter. Park and Brice literally evaporated. They turned to red mist when the light hit them. When the light hit me, I found myself back in my dorm room, just as it had been four years ago before I was recruited. Then I really woke up in Matt's bed.

Odd, I have not paid attention to my dreams in a long time, but this one was so vivid.

I was angry when I found out that Matt had decided to stay home from work. He did not seem to realize that the authorities would be looking for any breaks in pattern. Of course, he thought "authorities" meant the police. I reminded him that I meant people like the one we had killed.

I decided to go back to bed for a few more hours and took something to relax me.

6.23

Student: Shannon Amstutz

I woke up and Matt had ordered Chinese. I had not done that in years, either.

He showed me the evening paper and it seemed like the sleeper press was buying Matt's ruse.

We sat and ate. Soon he was telling me about his capabilities. My previous assumptions were completely wrong.

He and his mentor are engaged in a private struggle to eliminate reality deviants as well. He told me stories of their encounters with supernatural beings. And from what my probes reported, Matt thought he was telling the truth.

He seems content to more or less leave the source of his capabilities a mystery, or at least, to chalk it up to yet another inexplicable power, be it the Christian God or his mysterious tutor's belief in spirits.

He proceeded to initiate some mating protocols. He also chose that moment to inquire about the agents who would undoubtedly be searching for us. I imagined them pouring over the ashes of the facility, finding my car, scanning the wreckage for signs of my remains but finding nothing. Then the hunt would begin. Someone would finish Brice's mission.

I brushed Matt's attentions aside. He does not seem to understand the gravity of our situation. Still, as I sit here and write this, I almost regret refusing his attention. There is something about Matt that I would have called "sweet" in my old life. Perhaps that's trite. He seems a genuinely "good" person. Beyond measure. Maybe that should count for more than the ability to use Avogadro's number, or to perceive the loop and interplay of a DNA helix. I have not encountered that quality in recent memory.

Maybe I could have a new new life. To reclaim some of that I left behind, or perhaps simply a life again. Would that be enough for me now?

Or I could use Matt to buy my way back into the order's good graces. Perhaps if I produce useful allies against deviants, I can negotiate for my life. Although I am no expert on deviants or their cultures, I've never heard of beings such as Matt. If I can convince the authorities that I'm more valuable alive than dead, I might buy enough time to convince them of my innocence in Park's crimes.

Could I do that to Matt?

Can I afford not to?

6.24

Student: Shannon Amstutz

Matt convinced me to join him in a meeting with his mentor Archie. Matt is convinced that Archie can help us escape capture. Maybe he could. A cave in some backcountry is probably the only place I would be safe now.

Now I almost wish I had brought that book. If Matt's contact did have any deviant sources, I might be able to buy some help with that damn book. Still, they would probably assume

that I wanted to repent my "evil" ways or some such nonsense.

This Archie is an offense! He immediately accused me of being some kind of paranormal monster. I gave up arguing with him after a few moments. He discussed mythological mumbo-jumbo concerning uktena, haints and raven mockers.

He presented an intimidating front, but radiated fear pheromones—and cannabis. Matt spoke up for me, but it was useless. I wanted to take a reading from him using my helix ring but that would have involved touching him. My natural distaste for him besides, I got the distinct impression that he would try to do me physical harm if I made contact.

I went back to the truck and Matt came back with the keys to Archie's hotel room. It seems he won't be staying to plan our escape. We filled up the truck, bought a map and went to Archie's hotel room for the night.

We then saw the late news. They think Matt is a kidnapper.

Matt is all for making a run for it, but that will not work. Perhaps I should turn myself in. All it would take is a phone call.

ENDNOTES

For what it's worth, her hand was on a gun pointed at me, not the phone, when I entered. I'm not sure what alerted them to my entry. There were no active sensors in the area. Nonetheless, the operation was clean.

Please let me know what you uncover in your debriefing of FUCKYOUNBASTARDSFUCKYOUNBASTARDS
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Sorry, Agent Alexander didn't get to finish his last thought there. I interrupted him when

I knocked and sunk a chipping wedge into his head. It didn't make a sound, except for his body hitting the floor. I guess you guys are pretty good at hunting, but you suck at being prey.

I dragged his ass inside and looked around. Pretty fancy shit. Believe it or not, I can type and even read this little report of his. I wonder if I changed anything?

Probably not.

You see, I'm not here to lie to you. I'm here for the oldest truth in the fucking book. You know, "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth."

I believe in balance. You killed one of my people, and now we're even. Have fun with "Ms. Amstutz." I guess she'll tell you enough to make my life pretty difficult, so I'm killing Archie for you. After I write this, "Archie" is dead, if that was my real name anyway.

I've got to say, looks like you fucked up with her even worse than I did with Matt. Maybe you should listen to her before you kill her or brainwash her or whatever. Maybe she's right and we are after the same things. But I sure as hell want nothing more to do with you. If you're smart, you'll keep it that way. Fewer dead guys and all.

And now you have to wonder what else I read, and who I could tell and what I could say -- all sorts of other shit. You see, I'm not educated, but I'm smart enough. There's one thing you can say about my folks -- we are mean son of a bitch SURVIVORS.

I'm leaving and I'm not taking a dime from this room. I'm not leaving any evidence and I'm not coming back.

I may not have my doctorate in advanced monster cloning or killer white guys with guns, but I know how to type and hit the "send" button on an email. Read this and weep, fuckers. Kill me, and copies of this report might find themselves all over the place. Fuck with me or my people and I'll kill more of you.

I won't run and hide like Matt did.



CHAPTER 7: RULES AND STORYTELLING

"I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds."

— Ezekiel 13:20

MAGES IN HUNTER

There are many names for them. "Mage" is perhaps the most common among their kind. They also use magus, magician, wizard and will worker. Hunters may call them manipulators, puppeteers or witches. But what are these people really? What do they do, and even more importantly — how do they do it? Reality seems to bend conveniently to their advantage, money playing unexpectedly into their hands, bullets just missing them even though they're fired at point-blank range. Fortune smiles on these beings over and over, and only they seem to have any inkling why they are such favored children.

Wizards are baffling, dangerous and unpredictable to the imbued. Take the well-known images of Merlin and the Wicked Witch of the West and toss them out the window. These warlocks look like everyone else. They walk the streets. They work where hunters work. Their magic is a formidable and dynamic power, chaotic and ever-puzzling, used to make a person disappear before your eyes, or subtly used to "find" a key in a pocket that just happens to open a resistant padlock.

Hunters have no idea that they're dealing with warlocks. These sorcerers look and act like everyone else. They eat, breathe and drink coffee, but they're

elusive and unnaturally lucky. Most importantly, they seem to be able to make things happen that simply shouldn't be possible. They appear to alter reality at a whim, and at what cost to the people and the world that they manipulate? Are they utterly benevolent, aware of and concerned for the people and places around them, or do they use and abuse everyone and everything for their own gain?

This chapter discusses how to portray mages in your **Hunter: The Reckoning** game, whether as tentative allies or determined enemies of the imbued. This is what you need to know about who these strangers are, what they're capable of, and how they came to be. For further knowledge on the subject, see the wizard information in the **Hunter Storytellers Companion** and read "Building Better Monsters" in the **Hunter Storytellers Handbook**. If you're really ambitious, check out **Mage: The Ascension**. That Storyteller game explores these people completely.

Players, if you're reading this, please quit now. The secrets of these bizarre people follow. It's your Storyteller's job to know them. If you want to appreciate the confusion and fear that your hunter experiences by dealing with witches, maybe you should keep yourself as lost in the dark as your character is.

THE AWAKENING

Generally speaking, no one type of person becomes a witch. There are no likely targets, such as a culture or demographic group. Nobody who might suddenly flare up and wield magical powers. It isn't that easy. Magic is a fickle force. It could choose (or be chosen by) only those prepared to wield it. And when that happens, it can change everything.

The process is known in manipulator circles as awakening. The belief is that those without magic are, metaphorically speaking, asleep. The real world, the world of magic, passes them by as they stumble around with their eyes closed. These "sleepers" (another witch term) is your average John Q. Public who is oblivious to the supernatural workings of the world.

Occasionally, however, one of the sleepers "wakes up" with the power to change reality. He becomes a burgeoning mage. This magic may hit him one morning on the way to school, with little or no warning, or it may build over a period of days or weeks, even months. The change can be prefaced by haunting dreams, odd coincidences, or a strange air to the person that is unsettling. Then the individual's mind's eye opens and he suddenly has access to amazing capabilities. Granted, awakening doesn't automatically grant the power to sink continents or open gateways to Pluto, but it does open the door a crack. Small powers. Low-key capabilities. The capacity to tweak and nudge reality in ways that benefit the manipulator.

Who undergoes this awakening? Much as with people who are imbued, those who are mentally prepared for the transformation. People with minds open just a little more than their fellow humans. People who "sleep" restlessly in their day-to-day lives, barely conscious that there's more to the world. Individuals who just get a glimpse that there's more potential to life and existence than the daily grind. To some of these folks, magic becomes a wonderful tool — or magic chooses them to be its tools.

But what does this process do to a newborn witch? Perhaps the most common quality of manipulators' awakening is that it's different for everyone. One warlock might discover an awareness of probabilities and understand how to alter them with a thought. Another could have visions of fulfilling desires or goals, and events mysteriously come to pass as she dreams. Or a novice's senses could project across vast distances and grant him sensations that he's never known before.

And yet, some elements of this paradigm shift are fairly constant. A new mage probably feels alienated, outcast from the rest of the world. Normal people are disturbed by the newly awakened, as though she has become a social pariah. The witch's mere presence raises goose bumps, or makes others painfully self-conscious of

their own shortcomings. And the new mage is disoriented and disturbed in turn as magic starts to distort her awareness, perceptions and thoughts. She "hears" snatches from others' minds, recognizes actions that people try to hide or catches voices from other rooms.

New manipulators are also untrained. Their magic is outside their control and may manifest in dangerous and unexpected ways. A high-school student may defend himself against a bully and suddenly find that the bully's hands have been neatly severed, and he doesn't know how it happened.

There are all sorts of calamitous consequences that come with magical abuse, intended or not, that may cripple newborn warlocks. Overt displays cause physical pain. Causing an obvious effect robs the initiate of her senses. Performing a public spectacle goes out of control and people are killed. Some manipulators just don't make the grade and can't handle their newfound powers. Some may lose their minds or burn out while others may kill themselves out of fear or guilt.

But all of these common experiences at awakening can lead to an equally startling possibility: recruitment. Manipulators have all kinds of origins, philosophies and hopes. Newly changed ones are rare, and established ones can sense their emergence. Multiple factions hone in on a "newborn" to introduce him to their cause, to further their own agenda and bolster their own numbers. Despite their power, established manipulators still need to stand together against other mages and supernatural beings that seek to interfere with or harm them. Showing a young witch that she is not alone and that her powers are manageable and have the ability to grow is strategic and a relief to the frightened and confused novice. How a young sorcerer uses her training is up to her, but the fact remains that she is no longer an ordinary person. She is now a manipulator of reality.

As far as hunters are concerned, second sight suggests the presence of a fully awakened mage. The person is off or tainted somehow. But a mage who still undergoes the process of awakening — who has yet to develop — isn't so obviously wrong. A hunter may get a few odd impressions — a flash of color, a blink of light, a shimmering of imagery — but nothing so definitive as a sensation of "abomination." Observation edges such as Discern, Witness and Illuminate give only meager signals about emerging wizards — an artificially heightened pulse, a sensation of fear or anxiety from the subject, or brighter than usual colors surrounding the individual. Interpreted in different ways, these faint signs might suggest someone who teeters on the brink of the supernatural and who might still be saved, or someone who simply has yet to fall.

Jason Crown of Chapters 1 and 4 of this book is an excellent example of an awakening mage, and illustrates the confusion that can result for hunters who deal with such a person.

MAGES IN LEGEND

Myth and legend reveal various shades of magic and those who wield it. There are few myths that don't contain at least a smattering of magic. Enchanted objects, heroes with miraculous skills and strength, bizarre monsters conjured out of the ether. To a degree, that's all magic. Witchcraft, wizardry, legerdemain — call it what you will, it's essentially the same uncategorized stuff.

Throughout legend, those who more closely fit the description of mage tend to be stereotyped. For instance, witches stooping over cauldrons, turning over a broth of newt eyes and bat wings. Or silly-looking wizards in robes and pointed hats using their wands to transform lead into gold.

But those images aren't accurate. Maybe they once were, but not now. Nowadays, sorcerers appear to

be everyday people. They live in cities, walk down streets, drink in bars and read newspapers. Maybe in the privacy of their own homes or lodges they dabble in newt eyes or bat wings, but that's not the image they present to the world. Doing so would get them locked away, killed or worse. They're just as likely to whip out a Palm Pilot as they are a magic wand. Today, mages are more street level.

If you want to turn to myth and legend for a fitting example of how a mage might be portrayed, you could do worse than look to a figure like Jesus. He wore the clothes of his time, he (sort of) acted within societal boundaries, and he also happened to be able to perform miracles. Now imagine a person like that in a modern context.

FRACTIONS

Most witches gather in groups called Traditions. These collections are secret societies bound together by a loose common philosophy and a survival instinct. Some of these groups have extensive networks of laws and morality (in both magical and mundane matters), while others are merely various manipulators lumped haphazardly under a single banner. Each of the factions

tends to view magic in its own band in a metaphysical spectrum, which results in the primary differences between these groups. How they view magic — or more importantly, how they *do* magic — is crucial to recognizing the variances among the Traditions.



Below are the general types of witches that hunters are most likely to encounter. This is not a listing of all the factions proper; hunters are very unlikely to ever learn the names or even any salient details about all such societies, and even the ones discussed here are barely recognized. All the imbued know is what they see with their own eyes and hear from others sources such as hunter-net. (And if any hunter did know any accurate information about warlocks, it would be lost amid the misinformation espoused on the web and by word of mouth.)

Occultists: This type of mage can be anything from a weirdo kid who reads pseudo-Satanic books in his spare time to a hard-core occultist like Aleister Crowley who devotes his life to the study of esoteric practices. Their tools are numerous; they tend to rely on magical symbols, numerology and divination. Occultists often have libraries of ancient lore, whether small or large, and they base much of their magic upon these resources. Ritual is common. "Sacrifices" may take place (rarely of the human kind, but anything is possible). Overall, this type of manipulator acts in accordance with many of the stereotypical "secret societies" of the world such as the Masons, the Knights Templar and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Their magic may be accompanied by chanting in strange languages, rubbing of amulets or other mystical items, or even readings from strange books like the *Necronomicon*.

Modern/Neoteric: "Sorcerers" of this sort seek power in the progress of today. Their lifestyles — and their magic styles — are founded upon technology. They are hackers, architects, mad scientists and the lunatic fringe. They are comfortable with computers, the Internet and gadgetry (both low- and high-end). These mages tend to reject small-town life in favor of city living. They dress according to the latest trends or create their own progressive ideas of style. Their magic is often a mind-boggling hybrid of science, pseudo-science and esoteric practices. It isn't impossible for hunters to encounter a hacker-mage with a flat-screen LCD monitor decorated in ancient Sumerian sigils. These people might even build strange devices that act out of accord with *current* technology — computers that receive all instructions verbally, automobiles that move exceptionally fast, weapons that rely on sensory disruption. These mages are odd people indeed — like *Matrix* characters who have stepped off the screen and into the World of Darkness.

Religious: Believe it or not, manipulators exist among most of the world's major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism). It's possible for a hunter to come across a Catholic priest or even a Buddhist monk who appears "wrong" to the sight. Sometimes these people are just "plants" who pretend to be a part of a religion to influence the masses into thinking outside the proverbial box. Most of the time, however, these

warlocks truly believe in the religion to which they belong. Their magic is incorporated into the trappings and dogma of that faith. A rabbi manipulator may harness magic and notions of "universal paradigm" through the secret coding of the Hebrew alphabet. A snake-handling Baptist "mage" may perform magic (probably called "miracles") that assert and reveal the glory of God, even going so far as to perform spectacles in front of parishioners. To these sorcerers, magic and religion go hand in hand. Hunters may find these mages to be sympathetic — people who make honest faith a reality — or as dangerous heretics who lead humanity astray.

Pagan/Primeval: "New Age" or "pagan" traditions are the basis for these manipulators' (or more appropriately, witches') magic. They typically adhere to a mixture of Wiccan or shamanic belief. Some seem stereotypical and use items such as crystal balls and incense as tools of their craft, while others may be less obvious in their approach. In the latter case, imagine an eco-terrorist woodsman who supports a belief that magic exists in nature, so nature should be preserved. The magic of such pagans can be based on "spells" and may be accomplished through burning sage, banging drums or holding crystals. In general, these witches' belief systems are a conglomeration of forgotten ideals and may reflect elements of Native American, African and Celtic culture. Hints of such faith can lead hunters to believe in a "New Age conspiracy" if they're appropriately closed-minded, as all those crystal-wavers and tree-huggers are clearly part of some secret coven or plan.

Ecstatics: Throughout history, there have been groups such as Sufis, Voudoun or the Dionysian cults of Greece. Members of these organizations believe that enlightenment is attainable through the ecstatic experience — dancing, drugs, starvation and other assaults on the body and senses. Some modern manipulators follow similar paths, achieving magic through abuse or indulgence. Some adhere to ancient, primal trappings such as sweat lodges or to ascetic practices that seek purification through abstinence from food, water or sleep. Other manipulators root these ideals in the modern world and may attain "enlightenment" through trances achieved by electronic music, chemically manufactured drugs or sex. Any of these kinds of practitioners may form small cabals or whole cults based on the "losing of the self." To the uninitiated observer, such behavior can seem sinful, torturous, dangerous, decadent or self-indulgent.

Orphans: These manipulators are unfettered by any sort of socio-magical group. No one claims dominance over them, and they don't claim membership with anyone else. Why? There are various reasons. The first is that they just aren't "joiners." One isn't born into the various magical factions, they're chosen (meaning it's possible to move among them). An "orphan" may simply choose to remain unaffiliated. It's also possible that

BREAK THE MOLD

Don't think that mages are always lumped into the Traditions or categories described here. It's not always that cut-and-dry. While the bulk of mages may fall into these general groups, some exist beyond these terms. There are manipulators who worship death and entropy as living ideals, who bow at the feet of ancient and forgotten gods, who clutch madness and chaos to their breasts as gifts from the heavens. There are mages who are interested in nothing more than their own financial security and who go to casinos or play the market, using their own awareness of the fabric of the probability. Mages aren't clearly defined. For every by-the-numbers witch, there's some lunatic who bases his entire magical system on UFOs, angels or totem animals. When creating manipulators, visit some of the common traits portrayed in this book while you come up with your own style of wizardry. When it comes to the world of warlocks, nothing is ordinary — or forbidden.

a loner has awakened into ignorance and is totally unaware of the factions — or perhaps they are unaware of him. Regardless, these people tend to be the "Everymage" — they tend to espouse no agenda and usually don't have deep religious associations. They do their own thing without immediate superiors, guidelines or support. That lack of support is their greatest weakness, though. They can follow their own will regarding magic, but no fellow society members back them up when things go wrong.

THE TECHNOCRATS

There is another group of manipulators in the world that would appear to use no "magic" at all. And yet, they seem to be of a similar breed. They accomplish amazing feats, alter events around them and seem to change reality at their will. Instead of relying on occult or metaphysical paths, these people adhere to a strictly scientific blueprint. Their science, however, is well beyond the technological watermark that we know. Their "magic" operates in the realm of science fiction, at least to hunters' understanding. These technocrats (also called "agents" or "company men") might be seen using items such as cybernetic implants, computer LCD screens that are worn like sunglasses, or electron microscopes that can see phenomena smaller than quarks.

An important point to understand about this brand of manipulator is that while other mages are about change, this group is staunchly opposed to change of any kind. They are creatures of the status quo. They seek a unified world, a grand landscape in which we all watch the same TV shows, eat the same healthy foods and aren't bothered by any pesky supernatural influences. To maintain the

firmament of order, technocrats quickly try to squash any sort of deviance or aberrant behavior that disrupts citizens' quiet and peaceful lives — and that includes the activities of most monsters. Agents aren't keen on the actions of other manipulators, either. Such offensive warlocks are labeled "reality deviants" and are dealt with if they make waves. ("Dealt with" can mean anything from a warning to an assassination.) Bloodsuckers, shapeshifters, ghosts and other creatures are similarly dealt with when they make trouble. If an action or event goes against the grain and spooks the sleeper masses, the company men have something to say about it. Sometimes even hunters' activities raise their ire.

Becoming a technocrat isn't like being initiated into one of the sorcerer orders. An agent is awakened like any other mage — he may have strange dreams or experience flashes of power — but once other technocrats get a hold of them, that's it. Newcomers don't learn how to stage-manage the theater of reality. There's no initiation into occult mysteries or intense mystical traditions. An initiate's potential is explored through reason and science. He may suddenly get a full-blown scholarship to MIT, with "special" classes designed just for him. Or he may be "encouraged" to train with the FBI, only to be pulled out of the program six months later to participate in a more intense, highly classified (and nameless) program. From there, a manipulator is exposed to the dangers that reality deviants pose. He learns to deaden the dynamic nature of his own magic, allowing him to focus on enforcing rather than upsetting reality's consensus.

Anyone who awakens can be targeted for indoctrination into the technocratic world. Even manipulators who have operated as reality deviants for years can be targeted, kidnapped and brainwashed into supporting the very ideals they struggled so long to resist. The technocrats are perhaps one of the most invasive organizations the world has ever known — a secret underground "government" hell-bent on protecting the masses, no matter the cost.

TECHNOCRAT FACTIONS

Even within this seemingly unified order of agents there exist inner divisions that support and pursue different agendas, party lines and methodologies. Here are these separate factions in loose detail as the imbued might encounter them.

Suits: These agents are something like the "Men in Black" of UFO-lore (not the movie comedies). In urban legend, after a UFO sighting or other Fortean phenomenon, men show up in dark suits and glasses to interview or threaten witnesses. Sometimes they claim to be government agents, NASA employees or even journalists. They "encourage" witnesses to keep their mouths shut through either simple suggestion or outright intimidation.

Some technocrats actually behave this way, and they are perhaps the most likely agents that hunters meet. They generally appear in black cars and black suits, usually after a supernatural occurrence, and they perform various tasks. Sometimes they collect information or evidence. Other times they “sanitize” the area — sometimes capturing witnesses (who may or may not be seen again), burning the whole area with a controlled blaze or removing offending elements (i.e., the supernatural) with swift action. These manipulators often bear small technological items such as powerful handheld computers, earpieces and advanced cell phones. The similarity of their appearance to popular ideals of secret service and other government agents is uncanny, and it’s quite possible that hunters may interpret them as authority figures in the know about the supernatural. Look to Agent Alexander of Chapters 3 and 6 of this book for an example.

Terminators: If a significant supernatural phenomenon occurs (the kind involving explosions, public spectacles or the inexplicable running rampant), one or more of these agents might appear. The film reference above is intended. These individuals look like normal men and women, but they’re powerhouses. Unstoppable. They have unimaginable strength coupled with nightmarish stamina, and they *don’t back down*.

The hunter who “examines” a member of these shock troops (perhaps with clever use of Discern or a good Cleave attack) may discover something disturbing — underlying machinery. These individuals aren’t whole-

sale robots, and even the term “cyborg” is pushing it, but these company men and women have technology imbedded in their bodies. Whether it’s a skull of metal plating or a small computer implanted in a forearm, they are a mixture of man and machine. These manipulators are bent on action, not subtlety or subterfuge. Look to Agent Brice of Chapters 3 and 6 of this book for an example.

Scientists: These Technocrats stay largely behind the scenes and don’t often cross paths with the imbued. They are, as the name implies, scientific investigators. Think lab-coats, microscopes and scalpels. One may join a carload of suits to examine evidence on a scene. Or, if a hunter is captured he could encounter at least one of these guys as they hover over him with strange sensors and detectors, and perhaps as they cut away skin samples with an unusually thin, laser scalpel. These individuals are intellectuals and academics, working to further the knowledge of their technocratic faction. They don’t usually get involved in direct encounters. They may also be covertly placed in laboratories, government centers or in independent research stations across the world. Shannon Amstutz from Chapters 3 and 6 of this book is a good example of such a planted researcher. A hunter may even take a urine test for work and there on the other side of a window, taking away the sample, might be one of these technocrat scientists.

THE CRAFTS

Hunters are unlikely to recognize the difference between your average mage and what might be called a “hedge” or “craft” magician. All in all, they look similar. They both may covertly wear occult symbols. They both may have their noses buried in a book or laptop. And to the average chosen with active second sight, they look just as wrong or inappropriate or baffling as any other supernatural being. So why does the difference between a Tradition witch and a hedge magician matter? It’s important for you, the Storyteller, to know what you get the imbued into.

Craft magicians are essentially low-powered mages. Their capabilities don’t rely on harnessing the ever-shifting whorls and eddies of reality’s flow. In fact, they rarely have more than a bag of tricks at their disposal. Instead of making a Mercedes conveniently explode, these magicians tend to pull out Tarot cards or “spirit bags” and perform what might be considered parlor tricks. They can read futures (with accuracy), conjure small items or make other items disappear. They might even be able to “convince” someone to do something such as steal an object, as long as the request doesn’t defy the subject’s nature. But that’s about it. Their repertoire of capabilities isn’t extensive, although an advantage to that “weakness” is that they don’t have to worry about offending reality with their magic (see “Backlash,” p. 106). Their magic ducks just under the cosmic radar.



It's important to know that these low-level magicians don't really adhere to much of a social structure or organization. There may be small clusters or even secret groups of them (and feel free to use groups like the Knights Templar or the Bavarian Illuminati as expressions of these small-time manipulators), but they don't have nearly the network that *real* manipulators do. These guys aren't high rollers. They're stage magicians, shaman, medicine men, advisors, and little more. It's just that their magic is real rather than sleight of hand.

Hedge magicians are even *less* in the know about hunters than are their more magically aligned brethren. They know nothing about the imbued as a group, and only a few have a clue about individual hunters' existences.

They make good introductions for hunters into the realm of magic and wizardry. They imply that magic is real, but not very potent or dangerous. Contrast that impression with the capabilities of Tradition mages or technocrat agents and the imbued are devastated by their own ignorance and arrogance. Magic is devastating when wielded by the right practitioner, and the chosen learn a valuable lesson on making assumptions about the capacity and power of the world's monsters.

PHILOSOPHY

Manipulators are intensely devoted to cosmic designs, ideals that provide metaphysical models to which they adhere in practicing their magic. They uphold strangely transcendental views of the universe, dynamic paradigms that explain *everything*. They have constantly shifting notions of magic, of the spheres of Creation, and of how it all works together to be molded in their hands like putty. To manipulators, magic has a world of definitions. Some harness it through machinery. Some believe it's granted to them through their worship of God (or many gods). Others create magic out of violence or find it in nature or believe they can siphon it from an Ethernet port. They all believe something different and have various hopes for what they can achieve with the universe.

That's all well and good, but here's a little secret: *Hunters probably never learn all that*. The imbued don't get more than brief glimmers into wizards' philosophies. Perhaps they learn that there's more to the world than ordinary people see, that space and time are mutable, or that "fate is what we make it," but few warlocks are really willing to share even that much with such strange or intrusive people. A glimpse is all that's available to the chosen, and it's frightening all by itself.

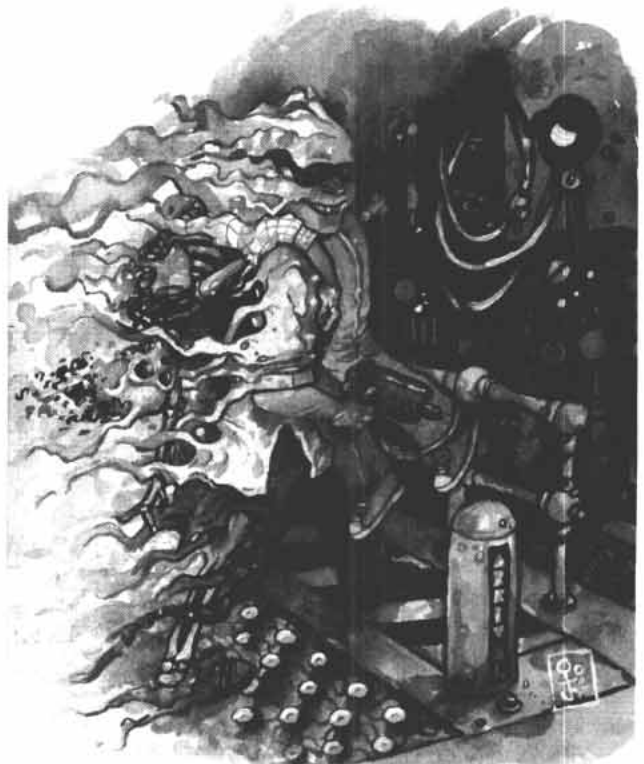
You need to have some inkling of manipulators' motives, though. They tend to uphold a few primary ideals that help you define their actions, behavior and personality.

The Three A's: Three concepts are crucial to mage comprehension: awakening, avatar and ascension. Awakening is discussed previously. It's all about an individual mortal opening her eyes to the possibilities of the universe and accessing magical powers as a result.

An avatar is the spirit of a mage, though no mage can agree on what it *really* is. It's seen differently by different witches — a tiny mouse-like voice inside their heads, a powerful reflection of their inner self, or a dead goddess who commands them from beyond the earthly plane. In short, the avatar is a sort of "inner spirit" that sometimes gently guides a mage or demands certain action. It's something like what the Messengers are for the imbued — an unseen force that's perhaps less cryptic (though only slightly so), and more engaging. A mage can feel his avatar as a part of his identity whereas hunters often perceive the Heralds and their influence as *other*.

"Ascension" also means something different for every witch, but it ultimately leads to one thing for all — the whole of humanity and reality rising to a new plane of consciousness in which magic is not only allowed, but infinitely possible. Some mages see it as a sort of heaven. Others believe it to be a simple shift in humanity's collective belief system. It's like awakening but on a global level instead of an individual one. Some mages pursue general human ascension so doggedly that sleepers get hurt in their efforts. How better to wake people than to shake them, right? You can't make a paradigm without breaking a few eggs, these sorcerers proclaim. If Tradition mages have one general goal, ascension is it. Sleepers' mass awakening, allowing wizards to work their magic with impunity and to stamp their impression of Creation on everything.

Technocracy agents, it should be noted, recognize the Three A's, too. They're familiar with them. They



just don't *follow* them. In fact, the Three A's stand in complete contrast to agents' philosophy. They don't want individual people awakening (unless they're on the techno-team, of course). They don't acknowledge avatars (science leaves no room for such claptrap). And agents vehemently discourage any form of ascension. They're proponents of the human status quo. A general improvement in the quality of life for all mankind — on the technocracy's terms. The Three A's support individual achievement rather than the betterment of all.

Another note: While hunters probably don't ever really learn of these three concepts explicitly, they may catch wind of them enough to make guesses at their meaning. The chosen might, for example, confuse the concept of an "avatar" with the Messengers, or see "awakening" as something akin to the imbuing or as some sort of demonic initiation. They might even interpret "ascension" as all of humanity waking up to monsters' existence, or as a cult-like pseudo-religious goal such as Heaven's Gate suicide-induced "ascension" in the group's spaceship. Whether such concepts are welcoming or terrifying to a hunter is up to her and her skewed comprehension of the ideals.

Reality Is Flexible: To a mage, reality isn't clearly defined. (Although it is to technocrats.) Science may seek to box reality up in rules and laws and theories, but it isn't that straightforward to manipulators. After all, didn't we once believe that God snapped his fingers and created Adam and Eve out of nothing more than divine providence? That the sun revolved around the Earth? That the spontaneous generation of life was not only possible, but was the norm? Ideas change. In fact, ideas change so much that the old rules are just as likely to be possible as new ones. To will workers, life can generate spontaneously. The sun can revolve around the Earth. There are no hard and fast rules to reality. It's flexible. Ever-changing based on what people can believe. And if mages get their way, reality will become even more malleable. Tradition mages don't like static thought. They're the personification of dynamics — forces of change, movement and magic. Reality is a blank canvas to them. They — or enough people — just need to believe an idea or possibility and it might just become true.

However, this concept of reality manipulation can lead to some very dangerous and selfish ends. It's easy for a mage to alter reality to his own benefit rather than to the general good. And who decides what "developments" are better than others? Twenty dollars found conveniently on the street may be twenty dollars out of a hunter's pocket, whether he knows it or not.

It's on this fine point — the ethics of playing with fate — that hunters may clash most severely with wizards. Sure, a sorcerer might seem human and even offer to help the imbued search for some walking dead, but how do hunters respond to the wizard's casual erasing of witnesses'

memories along the way? When do his tricks turn into playing God and violate rights, laws and morals?

People Are Asleep: As previously stated, mages diminish ordinary people who are unaware of reality as a plaything; they call everyday folk "sleepers." Such a perspective can influence how a warlock perceives the masses. In some senses, sleepers are considered the enemy. They represent static, unchanging thought. Their very presence can cause a witch's magic to fail or go awry and harm the spellbinder herself. Mages can therefore find sleepers infuriating, if not the subject of their wrath. Other sorcerers feel sympathy for sleepers. These mages may feel for the poor, ignorant masses that can't touch magic, that can't see the truth. Mages arose from the masses, after all. These warlocks may even try to help sleepers wake up as part of their ascension efforts. The wake-up call may come sooner or later, but whenever it's heard, it will be essential to wizards who seek to put their mark on Creation, once and for all.

Hunters fall into an awkward gulf between wizards and sleepers in terms of awareness. The imbued are conscious of the supernatural, of mages and of magic. They are even capable of miraculous feats of their own that would make hunters seem similar to wizards. Yet, are the chosen so quick to seek to impose their own will on reality? Have they turned their backs on their previous lives so defiantly that they no longer feel akin to friends and family? Most hunters are still immersed in old lives (or at least, try to cling to life from before), so they are perhaps quicker to count themselves among "sleepers" than "will workers." The idea of people as dull, listless or unconscious can challenge or anger the imbued and be a point of contention between hunters and witches. For many chosen, the idea of other folks remaining blind to the truth is all the more reason to protect and save them, rather than to abuse and achieve personal gain from the rest of mankind.

PORTRAYING MAGES

Warlocks can be difficult antagonists for you, your players and their hunters to grasp. Warlocks are inherently diverse; they all tend to look, think and behave differently, even within the small factions that they maintain. They're exceedingly rare, encountered by hunters less than vampires and shapechangers. And they outwardly seem like ordinary people.

So how do you account for all these complexities and still create someone who could be a dubious ally or determined enemy of your group's imbued? What themes are important to designing — and depicting — these strangers in a strange land? Here are a few ideas on how you might want to color such baffling people. These "themes" may help you create a complete picture of the witch or sorcerer you seek to introduce. These themes



can be used individually to make manipulators single-minded and extreme, or they can be combined to make complex, well-rounded adversaries.

Mages Are Human: That's right. In spite of the miracles manipulators perform, they *are* human. They eat, shit, breathe and bleed. They may have a fount of stunning powers, but they also go to diners and slurp soup. They have mothers, fathers and children. This is all particularly true for "young" mages (which hunters are likely to encounter most) who have essentially just stepped off the bus into a new existence. They often retain a great deal of their old lives, which may include credit-card debt, girlfriends, jobs, or any of the other accoutrements of "real life." These individuals may not even have any idea of what life as a witch is really like. Perhaps they remain uninitiated or have resisted the brainwashing that can go on in the halls of more established manipulators. These sorcerers' existence suffers upheaval as their new capabilities war with their old understanding of life, the universe and everything. Provided some hell-bent Avenger doesn't use a tire iron to slake his wrath on these individuals, these mages can be excellent objects of attention for hunters whose Mercy or Vision outweighs their investment in Zeal.

Mages Are Alien: Seems like a contradiction to what was just said, doesn't it? Some mages seem like normal people until viewed with second sight or observation edges. Others, however, are strange or disturbing from the outset, even when considered without any Messenger-enhanced senses. As time passes and warlocks come to grips with their existence and powers, and immerse themselves in the struggle to exact their own will upon the universe, many stray from the mundane world and get lost in labyrinths of magical theory, occult practices and "dissections" of reality. The longer one lives as a witch, the more detached from "paltry" day-to-day issues she becomes. Why pay bills when a dollop of magic and an Internet connection can make them go away? Why worry about health insurance when you or someone you know can use a rain-stick and chicken blood to force bones and wounds to mend? Someone who has items such as "change the fabric of reality" and "enforce the awareness of mankind" on a to-do list is unlikely to pay attention to family, pets, going to movies or drinking coffee.

Before long, these warlocks may consider themselves wholly different entities from humanity. They cast a cold gaze upon the mentally weak "cattle" of the consensus. They project an aura of disdain, an alien

resonance that unnerves ordinary people. If these entities encounter hunters, they dismiss the imbued as just more dull minds. Or — if these wizards recognize the spark within the imbued (or are confronted with it) — they seek to attach puppet strings to the chosen. These alien sorcerers try to find out how they can use these odd people as tools, and to learn what makes them tick. It's also possible that these will workers strap captured imbued to a cold metal table and begin exploring their brains (or souls) all in the name of *understanding*. Mages can be strange. Given enough time and distance, they may no longer act like comprehensible people. Their interests can drift far from the norm. They seem to function on an entirely different plane of thought, without regard for the world. If you want a mage as an antagonist, this might be the way to go.

Bookworm's contact Purple behaves in this distracted manner, although he seems capable of civility and even cooperation with hunters, if they demonstrate equal amenability.

Mages Are Curious: Mages often have voracious appetites for knowledge. Understanding something means the potential to turn it or to change its reality to their favor. They can be acutely interested in dissecting the world into microcosmic parts and examining every fraction of dust within. Their lives are often spent in pursuit of enlightenment — this is not some half-ass hobby. They doggedly pursue their own personal growth with unending passion. If they encounter something they don't understand, it's rare for them to look the other way or to turn a blind eye. Manipulators aren't exactly *laissez-faire*.

This curiosity is likely to be brought to bear when encountering hunters for the first time. The imbued — *when they're noticed at all* — are a startling mystery to suddenly emerge from the sleeping masses. And while many witches might keep quiet and hidden in the face of such a strange new phenomenon, studying it quietly and from afar, not all of them settle for that delicate touch. They're actively inquisitive about the chosen, much like the proverbial cat that got killed by his curiosity. *How* curious is up to you, but it's plausible for them to be dangerously interested — following, studying, observing, gathering information on, asking questions about and even confronting the imbued. Hunters unknowingly placed under the manipulator microscope are destined for a very bizarre and hazardous future.

Mages Are Selfish: As the saying goes "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Witches have *power*. Dangerous possibilities exist within the realm of magic. A well-trained and experienced manipulator may be able to turn all the air in a room into poison, change her eyesight so that she may see the future in a mirror, or transmute plastic into gold. Imagine the power to have a ceaseless flow of resources, to be

able to kill with a thought or to change your identity when your old one becomes boring or troublesome. Sure, you might have the best intentions for humanity at heart, you might even hold onto your old life, but how long can it be before you're tempted to use your power for personal gain — at another's expense? Circumstances may demand that a person be harmed if you're going to survive an encounter with a rival witch or technocracy agent. How much time passes before being forced to compromise people for personal gain turns into regular abuse? What's another sleeper, after all? Ultimately, mages look out for A-Number-One.

Repercussions for such selfishness apply when hunters learn of, witness or are subjected to warlocks' dismissal of ordinary people. Suddenly, some sleepers awaken. Not to embrace magic, but to administer justice.

Mages Are Unpredictable: Witches outside the technocracy allow themselves static thought. They focus on change, development and evolution. They're bent on kicking reality into an unending state of raw flexibility. Using their magic, they can put a gun to reality's head just to see what happens. They tend to be unpredictable as a result. It doesn't help that every mage is different, with various motives, aspirations and agendas, whether to restore old world superstition or to force super science down humanity's throat. Worse still, their magic is volatile, a chaotic blend of power that may not always do what they hope. It can go off unexpectedly like a bomb, causing peculiar side effects or earth-shaking tragedies. When a manipulator is in the room, he's never resting, reading the paper or docile. His mind is somewhere, even if his body is still. *Something* is going to happen. A hunter doesn't usually know what or when, but he can try to be prepared for the worst.

MAGES AND THE IMBUED

When a mage and a hunter meet, what happens? As the Storyteller, it's not necessarily important for you to know what the hunter does or thinks. The hunters in your game are most likely represented by your players, and they happily handle that part for you. If you're running hunters who *aren't* controlled by players, then a lot of this book offers fodder for possible imbued perspectives. Mages look wrong, and yet ostensibly seem human. They have dangerous powers and still check their email and buy groceries and do other "people things." Hunters typically react to these strangers according to their own personalities (and as reflected by their creeds).

But what do mages think of hunters? As stated before, mages are very individualistic and there's no single opinion or response to unite them regarding the imbued. But warlocks can have some general reactions worth considering.

First and foremost, mages may think hunters to be some kind of threat. After all, people who demonstrate

inexplicable capabilities, who recognize mages as something other than ordinary and who can respond to wizards' supernatural activities aren't exactly normal. And they could get in the way of manipulators' plans. Warlocks don't like things impeding their progress or standing in the way of enlightenment. If a witch's efforts or health is endangered (or she simply predicts such danger), she may react to the perceived threat with violence or more insidious tactics (mind-wipes, torture or magical intimidation).

Also consider that hunters can look like they're on the technocratic team. Here they are, a bunch of intruders who show up at inopportune moments to throw a monkey wrench in witches' plans. They can seem hell-bent on interfering with or stopping sorcerers' efforts, and they may look like blue-collar versions of those agents who seek to enforce the status quo. Or they could even seem like religious freaks because some hunters use loaded terms such as "monster," "witch-hunt" and "Satanic spawn," depending on hunters' religious upbringing. In any case, a mage can believe himself and his efforts to be jeopardized by these people, and sometimes the best way to deal with a persistent threat is to eradicate it. Technocrats can turn weapons on hunters. These newcomers may be unclassified as company men understand deviants, but a bullet may still dispose of the problem quickly and neatly.

Another possible reaction to imbued appearance or interference is simple interest. Who are these people? What do they want? What are they capable of? Such questions aren't answered and such possibilities aren't explored if a mage resorts to assault as a first response. A manipulator may hope to learn everything he can about and from hunters, whether in a friendly, jovial manner or with a more clinical approach. It isn't implausible for a hunter and a witch to sit across from each other at a diner, tentatively comparing notes without letting too many cats out of the bag. The humanity quality of both can make them intriguing to each other, if both have open minds. Where it goes from there (violence, friendship) is anyone's guess, depending on how the two treat and deal with each other.

Warlocks may also respond to the imbued in purely practical terms, maybe in connection with an interested approach. They're not called "manipulators" for nothing. They control. They direct. They apply forces at their will and needs. And here are hunters, capable of some strange effects yet apparently ignorant of or oblivious to the depths of magic and the breadth of the supernatural at work in the world. A Machiavellian mage is likely to use a hunter like a loaded gun — hold it, point it at an enemy and fire. If a witch is oppressed by a covert team of technocrats, why not spin the attackers as corrupt government pawns or controllers and set the imbued loose? Or maybe a warlock does indeed dabble in magic, but for the betterment of

mankind, while he knows of another wizard who casts spells to harm people and take what he wants from them.

Technocrats can look upon hunters as potential tools as well. As seeming authority figures in the know about monsters, and with plans to freeing humanity from monster influence, company men can seem like ideal allies to hunters. Finally, someone in charge whom hunters can confide in (assuming hunters don't turn their second sight on these people)! While agents might see hunters as a form of reality deviant, these outsiders can have similar goals to the organization and be used in the short term to deal with other deviants. ("We have reliable intelligence that says a being preys upon people in C quadrant of 37 District — on Maple Street as you know it.") If these tools can be kept on a short leash, they can be used for a while before they too are disposed of as aberrations and threats to the general good.

SAME, YET DIFFERENT

A potential theme to explore in a **Hunter** game featuring manipulators is their similarity to the imbued. The blurred lines between the two can deny an "us-them" relationship. They share the obvious common factor of both living somewhat normal lives in the everyday world. They started as ordinary people and still have links with or remember ordinary life. But both hunters and mages become alerted to a different world than what they understood before. Creatures and possibilities exist that were unimaginable before. With that understanding comes the capacity to perform some stunning, inexplicable feats. And with such gifts comes contact with some kind of greater awareness, being or force that seems to offer direction or purpose beyond what the mage or hunter can find for himself. How are hunters and mages any different? They could even mistake each other for kindred spirits or the same "kind."

Chapter 1 of this book illustrates how a high-school teacher could misinterpret a student to be a burgeoning hunter when the boy in fact becomes aware as an uninitiated warlock. In the prologue of **Hunter Book: Hermit**, a mage mistakes Violin99 as a mage who's never received formal training or guidance with his avatar.

The difference between hunters and sorcerers lies in the nature of their origins. Mages awaken to their capacity to control the world, the universe and reality to their own ends. It's a potential that arises from within and that defines warlocks as strictly beyond the human pale, as supernatural. Hunters, by contrast, receive awareness and power beyond their own will or choosing. They're made receptacles — tools, even — by higher forces to fulfill an agenda or will of those beings. Hunters are still the people they were before, forcibly gifted in contrast to mages' innately talented.

It's such fundamental differences between mages and hunters that can lead to subtle and even insurmountable rifts between them. By virtue of their very existence as supernatural beings, mages stand out from

the mundane when viewed with second sight and observations edges such as Discern, Witness and Illuminate. A mage can be friendly, even a proven ally, but he always registers as off or inhuman, bearing a glow beyond the human norm, crackling with energy or subtly drawing energy from his surroundings. A hunter may not even want to see such features in a warlock-friend, but catching him in a *look* reminds the chosen of her bedfellow's true nature.

And that mere difference between mage and hunter or between mage and ordinary person can be enough to divide friends irrevocably. Mages' supernatural identity makes them a threat to the chosen. The danger may be perceived as tolerable now, but there's no ignoring that it's there and can manifest at any point in time. Just as a trainer trusts his dog, he should never forget it is an animal that might bite the hand that feeds it if pushed too far.

HUNTERS AND TECHNO-MAGES

The problem with technocrats is that they're not real big on "anomalies." Reality isn't flexible or mutable to them. It needs to be clearly defined, with signposts and fences to keep everyone inside the boundaries and safe from the dangers that lie beyond. Hunters, when they're encountered or recognized at all, represent a definite anomaly, but they're not so easily categorized. The few hunters who appear on the technocrat radar project an incomplete and confusing picture.

Hunters aren't normal, but they appear to be on the right side. They're not necessarily mages. Reality is not their plaything. But they're certainly not ordinary, either. They can perceive magic at work and can do some pretty amazing, if limited, things. So what's the deal? Technocratic agents aren't ones to sit on their asses, content to let undefined phenomena pass them by. If they come across and recognize the abnormality of hunters, they act, specifically to better understand or contain such anomalies. If a group of hunters confronts a mage in a mall food court, sending shoppers screaming, technocrats might arrive to clean up. Same goes for any encounter with any supernatural being, whether walking dead, ghost, bloodsucker, shapechanger or warlock. If there's a big enough scene, there's a chance that these agents make their presence (and agenda) known.

They might pull up in a black SUV, usher onlookers (hunters included) from any "crime scene," quickly collect a few samples and then drive away. Such an understated intrusion is creepy enough by itself. It's worse if hunters (who may have manifested glowing lights, black smoke or a whirlwind) are stamped as "reality deviants," right along with the beings the imbued faced. Maybe the company men note the hunters and maintain a vigilant watch. Maybe they attempt to capture the chosen and interrogate (experiment and torture) them. Or maybe they just try to put bullets in the hunters' heads, collect the bodies and incinerate them.

But what do hunters think of agents? If the imbued run into these mysterious beings often enough, the chosen undoubtedly form their own theories and opinions, especially if agents are evasive or downright authoritarian about their activities, organization and purpose. ("Our business is disclosed on a need-to-know basis, and you do not need to know.") But agents can be hard to decipher. They look like scientists and government operatives, but they also look wrong or show signs of being creatures, which leads to alarming conclusions. If scientists know about the supernatural, does that mean monsters might have been created through science, like the Ebola virus or the nuclear bomb? If agents are wrong to the sight, does that mean they're the mythical string-pullers at work behind the government? And yet, if operatives seem to work against monsters, does that make the "Men in Black" the least of all evils and perhaps even worthy of an alliance — until the hunters can deal with them, too? Are technocrats good guys, bad guys or something altogether different?

MISUNDERSTANDING

Generally, mages know next to nothing about hunters. The two rarely meet. When they do, however, the first thing a mage thinks isn't likely to be: "Hey, look at that new breed of witch-hunter!" Regarding the sleeper masses, mages are oblivious or prideful. Ordinary folks are considered lost in their blindness, so little attention needs to be dedicated to them. If a mage with this mentality passes a hunter on the street, the wizard probably overlooks her completely. His primary need is to open normal people's minds to magic and help them ascend. Prideful mages look down on regular folks, believing sleepers incapable of ascending and thus be-

MAGES AS MONSTERS

Throughout this chapter, mages have been portrayed as capable of walking the line between human and alien, being both in the scope of sympathy and outside the realm of forgiveness for hunters. That's part of the charm of introducing warlocks to a **Hunter** game — they are their own double-agents, leading the chosen to trust them one minute, and appalling the imbued with their inconceivable behavior the next. But that doesn't mean you can't go a different route and make mages total fucking monsters. It's your game, and if your story benefits from making manipulators Pure Evil, go for it. There are certainly those who have no problem with mentally (or physically) pillaging those who stand in their way to sate their diabolical urges. If you want infernal magicians who can pull imps and devils out of their hats, go for it. The World of Darkness is your plaything and the Golden Rule always applies.

neath notice. These mages pass hunters in the street because they simply don't care about the "sheep."

It's possible that witches do take notice of these strange people, though. Most likely, hunters make their presence known with a display of power or by confronting a warlock or his pawns directly. Those who encounter the imbued tend to form misconceptions about them.

Hunters Are New Mages: Makes sense, doesn't it? One day, a normal person's perceptions shift wildly to the left. She gets messages from beyond. She exhibits powers outside the scope of rational possibility. On the surface, she looks, talks and acts like a mage, and a manipulator is likely to think that a new imbued is really a newly awakened, uninitiated witch. The problem is, mages like to indoctrinate and train newcomers, so if this misunderstanding is made, it can have disastrous repercussions. Consider a mage who brings a newly chosen hunter back to his chantry to introduce her to his allies. They may actually try to teach the hunter magic abilities! (Which can't work.) In time, it becomes apparent that the imbued doesn't have an avatar and can't manipulate reality as mages do. What happens next is anyone's guess. Perhaps the mages try to keep the hunter in their confidence to study, understand and use her as a tool in the world. Or perhaps they seek to kill her for knowing too much.

Now imagine the concept of a hunter being mistaken for a mage taken a step further, with technocrat agents discovering the imbued. The agency frowns on wildcards like that, and probably tries to capture and mind-wipe the hunter to destroy her abilities, or seeks to convert her to the organization's agenda, or just tries to kill her outright. In the first two instances, the "initiate" quickly proves unusual as a mage when second sight's protection keeps her mind, individuality and capability's fully intact. She can't be reprogrammed or assimilated by her very nature. The technocracy thus has something *else* on its hands and must decide what to do with this mystery. The agency might try to maintain friendly relations as a father figure for the hunter and keep her at its disposal to deal with other aberrations. It might subject her to a barrage of tests and experiments to learn what she is and to categorize her. Or the organization might just try to dispose of her and be done with it.

Hunters Are Pawns: Mages and agents tend to be paranoid. They're assailed by opposing forces from every direction, whether it's by other mages, from shadowy supernatural enemies or from reality itself. Hunters, ignorant of what they've become and why they can do *things*, may be interpreted as the puppets of these threatening forces. If a mage encounters sleepers who suddenly roll over and become dangerous, she doesn't automatically accept that they're empowered, self-determined beings. No other sleepers are, so why should these ones be? More likely, she suspects that someone is behind these humans, that something is bestowing them powers and putting

them in the way of the witch's designs. Some opposing mage from another radically different belief system, perhaps? The techno-agents using a new kind of weapon? Or maybe reality itself has decided to punish the witch by throwing these humans in her way. Ultimately, hunters end up looking like puppets, and mages are likely to try to find out who pulls their strings. Medea performs just such an investigation in Chapter 4 of this book.

Hunters Are the Future: Mages love the idea that they foster some sort of mass awakening across the world. Quite a few manipulators believe that throwing open everyone's mental doors is a good thing. That would make for a new golden age for warlocks, in which they could warp reality at a whim, without the weight of humanity's disbelief crushing their efforts. Imagine such a warlock meeting one of the imbued. The mage might be the object of the hunter's imbuing. In the mage's eyes, he demonstrates magical awareness and capabilities, but perhaps not the capacity to control reality or deal with it in the terms that other mages do. This new development might come as a wonderful surprise: The hunter may be perceived as the "next step in human evolution." That is, the hunter's change may suit the mage's vision (however skewed) of mass enlightenment.

So what happens then? The hunter becomes a subject of fascination for the warlock. Perhaps the mage approaches the hunter to discuss what has happened, upholding the chosen as a pseudo-messiah. Maybe the warlock seeks to take the hunter back to his allies with similar results as those discussed for mistaking a hunter for a burgeoning mage. The sorcerer could trail the hunter and protect him against any supernatural threats that loom over the subject. Or maybe the will worker seeks to study and experiment upon the hunter to learn what makes him different, and how the same can be achieved in other sleepers.

If a technocrat encounters a hunter and believes him to be the first in a wave of waking sleepers, the agent's first recourse is probably to cleanse the situation. To amputate the infected limb. To stem the contagion. And if more of these infected sleepers emerge, well, they need to be studied under more clinical circumstances to find a remedy to the problem.

WORD OF MOUTH

If mages can encounter, recognize, investigate, confront and deal with hunters, why isn't knowledge of the imbued widespread among witches? Why haven't will workers all taken the imbued as acolytes, subjected them to autopsies, or systematically eradicated the chosen wholesale? Some wizards run into and run afoul of hunters, but word of these people isn't shared or isn't believed for various reasons.

First, mages and hunters are so sufficiently rare that encounters between them are minimal in the grand scheme of worldly interaction. Two ants from different

colonies might meet on a beach, but it takes a long time for them to take stock of opposing numbers and to locate each other's hill. Lots of little skirmishes happen before all-out community confrontation breaks out. Throw in distractions for each side such as mages' other pursuits and hunters' interactions with monsters of all other kinds, and you get forces fighting wars on various fronts. The desire or capacity to focus on each other diminishes or is lost completely. Mages simply don't have the numbers, resources or bandwidth to immerse themselves in the hunter phenomenon.

Those mages who do notice hunters often do so in the environments in which both reside. The streets, businesses and the facilities of the everyday world. These are hunters' haunts, because these are the locales in which they still live. The mages who also frequent these places are often newly changed and try to hold onto their previous existence as well. That means these people are often inexperienced or young as wizards go. They don't comprehend all the creatures that exist out there. Nor can they always tell a vampire from a werewolf from a Defender. Interactions with hunters are confusing and frightening, just the kinds of things that mages don't like to discuss until they're better informed. They don't want to lose face among their kind for being rash or foolish. They don't want to cry wolf until they have a real wolf at which to point. And even if these initiate sorcerers made noise about hunters' existence, more experienced or trained wizards would probably chalk up any claims to ignorance, confusion or panic.

And never forget that mages are paranoid. They struggle with themselves and with enemies to survive and gain power. Why make a lot of noise about a strange kind of sleeper when knowledge of it can be used as a weapon against others? A conniving witch can turn hunters on rival wizards or against the technocracy. Why leak word of her secret weapon? This paranoia keeps them from believing stories about "dangerous people." Such claims might be perceived as a trap, a ruse or a distraction staged by Tradition or agency adversaries. Indeed, why would sleepers start waking *now* when the world is in such disarray and the technocracy has such a firm hold? Besides, there's nothing new under the sun. If something is going on among the masses, it must have happened before and the Traditions, or the company, already knows about it.

The fact is, knowledge of hunters doesn't spread like wildfire among mages because they don't want to believe it, despite all their claims to seek knowledge and understanding. The imbued don't appear on wizards' collective radar.

ENCOUNTERS

We know how mages can come into being. We know what they might want and how they strive to achieve it. But the important question is: How do hunters encounter

them? In what instances do mages and hunters clash or coincide? Here are a few ideas for events involving mages that could signal hunter attention. In fact, these developments could make mages the foci of hunters' imbuing, potentially setting the stage for a chronicle in which reality's manipulators are primary antagonists.

Claiming a Node: Nodes (see "Places of Power," page 104) are cherished landmarks to sorcerers. Some nodes are located far from human habitation (sacred sites deep in forests or gorges). Others are smack dab in the middle of civilized areas, or ancient burial grounds kept hidden from the urban sprawl that has encroached upon them. Mages flock to these "holy" places, hungry for the magical energy (Quintessence) contained there. Mages might guard over such places and ensure that no one mage takes too much power for himself, or rival witches who might fight for control of such a locale.

How do hunters fit in? What if a node is on a hunter's property (as is the case for Hannibal in **Hunter Book: Defender**)? What does a mage's harvesting of energy from a node look like to a hunter? Is it some kind of freakish ritual that seems to diminish the flora, fauna and people who live in the region? Does wizard protection of the site directly oppose some good that people could do with the same place? For instance, a protected forest that could be turned into a factory and create jobs for a town full of unemployed? Or do witches quarrelling over a node put the people in the vicinity in danger, and the imbued have to do something to protect the defenseless? And if hunters take control of the location or impose their own will over it, how do they respond to other mages who come to gather its strength, to retake control of the spot, or to get revenge for the place's "corruption" by sleepers?

Warring Factions: Manipulators are rare in the world. Even if numerous, their presence might not be felt extensively. Despite their potential to cause sweeping change, they tend to keep their activities on the down-low and maintain a veil of secrecy. Trying to invoke too much change at one time under the weight of a world and populace that's not prepared for radical revision only leaves individual mages exposed and isolated. Also, mage and agents' vying ideals for how to change reality lead to struggle, which undermines the possibility for a new, all-encompassing direction. Playing one's hand in this environment can get a mage killed before his gambit for reality can be realized.

But sometimes the cat comes screaming out of the bag, especially when witches' war spills over into the streets. There are numerous factions of manipulators, some numbering in the handfuls, others in the thousands — and very few of them get along. One priestly mage may have it in for a handful of Dagon worshippers. A cluster of technocrats may want to silence some small-town enchanters who have manipulated the local media



in hopes of encouraging ascension. Whatever the case, when mages fight it's unlikely to be quiet. It starts as a murmur. It may take a year of political and social backstabbing, but once the violence gets underway, it's hard to contain. Whether subtle or obvious magic is used (see p. 103), apparent are the wounds and scars inflicted by magic — inexplicable events, masses of people with no memory of time, reality temporarily gone haywire. Hunters are likely to hone in on such turmoil by nature, by virtue of second sight, or due to their own vigilance for signs of trouble. The general populace might believe that a building caught fire because of electrical overload, but hunters may recognize that a razed building and scorch marks throughout the neighborhood had to be caused by more than that. Now it's just a matter of learning who's behind it all.

Enlightening the Masses: Sleepers are blind or ignorant of magic and its possibilities, and witches don't like it. It's this global obliviousness or close-mindedness that denies manipulators the power they could wield. Without the wall formed by consensus opinion, mages could make the impossible possible. So, every chance they get, warlocks may try to "enlighten" the masses to spark their imagination bit by bit. It all sounds very

nice; it sounds like a good idea. But mages' intent isn't so benevolent, especially when every mage has a different notion of enlightenment. One sorcerer may sell drugs to high-school kids (or younger children), because she believes they open the mind. Other mages may "acquire" (read: kidnap) promising individuals and try to rewrite their minds with magic, twisting their subconscious minds in an effort to open their third eye. What does it matter if a "patient's" own identity is lost in the process? A mage's idea of inspiring sleepers can even involve violence, murder, sex or non-consensual abuse. Mages may think they do humanity a good turn, but humanity doesn't necessarily want to be turned, at least not on the terms that witches intend.

Mages exacting such harm is a great draw for hunters, who witness the fallout of atrocities committed, and who may seek the parties responsible. Perhaps victims don't even perceive how they've been changed, and don't remember anyone doing anything to them, yet the imbued recognize the touch of corrupters. Such immersion in witch activity can strike close to home. What does a hunter do when he learns his 12-year-old nephew overdosed in study hall because of some manipulator in search of fertile minds?

OBSERVING MANIPULATORS

With second sight, a mage looks wrong or off. He might crackle with energy momentarily or smell of burnt offerings or ages of dust. Acolytes, agents and craft magicians may also seem strange in similar or unique ways. Air may shimmer around them. A gray pall may be cast over them when others appear normal. (See "The Awakening" and "Support Systems" for full details on apprentice and initiate appearance.) Second sight confers no hints as to what these beings may truly be, only a general sense of aberrance, of something being off the mark. Hunters have to fill in the blanks and make estimates based on instinct or prior experience.

Some observation edges may offer further insights into magical entities, assuming a hunter reads the signs correctly. The Discern edge reveals certain minute details that can help identify a witch. The power might show that the subject's chest does indeed rise and fall with breath, or that there is color to her cheeks — that she is alive. The edge might point to details that set the subject apart from everyone else, such as sigils tattooed on his body, or jewelry that bears odd symbols. Some manipulators have strange markings across their bodies caused by magic gone out of control. Perhaps a mage has different-colored eyes, unusual striation patterns on her skin, or even a forked tongue. Agents bear odd signs, too, but with clues geared toward their science-reliant natures. Discern may reveal skin-level ports or protruding implants. An earpiece wire might not run to a pocket radio but actually plug into an agent's hip. A technocrat's palm might bear tiny fiber-optic probes for interaction with tools.

Illuminate offers insight into auras and light that surround beings. While hunters may not know it, the color seen indicates a mage's aptitude in certain realms of magic (for simplicity, use the aura color of the mage's highest rated Art). Bookworm55 and other hunters have dealt with the mage called Purple (named after the color the wizard is seen to emanate through use of Illuminate). Purple's aura is so because of his proficiency in the Fortune art. (Mages' aura colors can be found under "Magical Powers," page 105.) If a mage has equal scoring in two or more Arts, pick the one seen according to the mage's personality or mood at the time.

Two important notes on using Illuminate on mages: This aura system does not apply to acolytes, apprentices or hedge magicians. They project no special colors when viewed with the edge, other than seeming odd, as with normal second sight. Also, regardless of their magical aptitudes, technocrat agents always have the same aura: flat-matte gray. It is unchanging and doesn't exhibit the flair or chaos that a witch's aura can.

That said, how a hunter interprets the colors he sees through Illuminate is entirely up to him. He may believe through word of mouth that all wizards have purple

auras, and when he encounters a sorcerer or agent who bears a different color, the imbued may have no idea what he's up against — and rightly so.

Finally, the Witness edge may reveal a glimpse of how a wizard's magic harms defenseless people. Scenes may appear to involve mere coincidence in the mage's presence — a person falling down an open manhole, being hit by a car, standing in a puddle when a power line falls. Perceiving enough of such images leads to a trend surrounding the subject, and might suggest the influence he has over those in his vicinity. Or, knowledge that a mage is off, combined with a glimpse of a person being hit by a car in his presence, might be enough to lead a hunter to believe that the warlock was responsible.

These observation edges provide no hard and fast answers about will workers. Nor do they explicitly identify them with a big name-tag saying "wizard." The edges don't directly reveal the forces at work behind subtle magic; they may just show the convenient results of such power. The edges don't gauge the magnitude of a mage's potency. Indeed, they may raise more questions than they answer. Why are his eyes all black? What does that flickering red aura mean? What the hell is that guy doing with the sunglasses with microchips built in? Hunters have to answer these questions for themselves and apply lessons learned to future encounters — assuming the same signs are apparent then.

SOCIETY

Manipulators are a pretty scattered lot. They're not particularly unified (with the exception of the technocrats, who appear to be nothing but unified), and they all have wildly different notions on their own existence and purpose. There are some common elements to their "society" that can help you portray them to hunters, though. These are features that occur or appear frequently by virtue of playing with reality, seeking to awaken humanity or dodging the near-omniscient eye of the agency.

And yet, despite these low-key, common traits, remember that the larger scope of mage society is never seen by the imbued. Mages have no intention of giving away their secrets and vulnerabilities to a bunch of odd humans. Not even newly imbued hunters who are mistaken for mages are shown the big picture; there are many magical secrets that are simply not meant for underling eyes.

NO MORE ELDERS

The elders of mage society are gone. Not even warlocks know what happened for sure (although hunters may hear theories about the elders being trapped in another world). What's left behind is a rag-tag bunch of street-level magicians who struggle for clues about the secrets and truths of the world and the cosmos. The remaining witches possess significantly less power than

their absent forebears, and are more concerned with trying to stay alive and free than they are with controlling the universe or demanding ascension from the ignorant masses.

It's improbable for a hunter to come across some grand wizard of enormous power and metaphysical insight — partly because these old mages wouldn't have anything to do with hunters, and partly because they're just plain gone. Since there's no sign of the elders coming back, this is a chance to pose hunters with antagonists who they can understand, and who don't have the power to instantly turn a hunter into a frog. Remaining mages are just getting their footing in a world suddenly bereft of many of the old laws and ways.

THE WAR

There's a war being fought over the hearts and minds of mankind. Each mage wants a piece of humanity's ascension and has her own ideas about achieving it. The biggest factions on the field are the witches and the agents. Freedom (or chaos) versus stasis (or order). A lot of manipulators say the war is over and stasis has won, but the truth is that it's still being fought in skirmishes, fits and starts. Because mages are such a diverse lot (and happen to wield some impressive powers), they tend to get in each other's way. Their various ideas about magic, how to deal with sleepers, and whether or not ascension is even a viable goal can clash and lead to feuds or infighting that dilutes efforts against the real enemy. And when warring or competing forces clash, there's inevitable fallout. There's evidence of magic in use that needs to be covered up. Strange occurrences. Quintessence expended and nodes destroyed.

The result can be an apparent weakness on which hunters can capitalize, playing wizards against others, calling the "authorities" when warlocks dare to go toe to toe, feeding agents or sorcerers tips about others of their kind, and watching while the groups do the hunters' work for them. How far hunters can prey upon such vulnerability is influenced by how much they know of mages' internal struggle.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

There is no "plague of mages upon the Earth" as hunters might perceive. For every 20 walking dead, there might be one mage. If a hunter sees one mage, however, he may see more — or what he *believes* are more. They tend to gather in groups and support systems, sometimes even going so far as to live under one roof (see "Places of Power," page 104). Still, mages are few. But their "helpers," two types in particular, are more prevalent.

The first kind are called apprentices or acolytes. Hunters refer to them as "mind slaves" or "puppets." They appear to be largely normal and may have no magical capabilities to call their own. They are research scientists,

computer technicians, librarians, museum curators or just about anything that suits the needs of the warlock (or warlocks) who direct them. Their functions vary. They may be required to gather information or objects, to be bodyguards or hired killers, or they may just be confidants.

There's a difference between acolytes and apprentices, though. Acolytes are often the pawns of manipulators. They're normal people who work for sorcerers. Apprentices, though, have been chosen and indoctrinated into a mage's ways and are given at least a small glimpse into the magical world. The rule is: Acolytes do not show up to second sight, apprentices do. ("The Awakening" above, suggests how initiates might appear slightly different from their teachers when studied with the sight.) Apprentices operate in close proximity to their masters and are often chosen because of potential magical capacity. Acolytes are ordinary folks who go about mundane business; they just happen to do it according to a sorcerer's desires.

(Note: Acolytes and apprentices are never chosen for the imbuing by the Messengers. Their proximity to or dalliance with magic, no matter how superficial or unwitting, precludes them from being imbued.)

Each mage has at least five helpers. Hunters may confuse assistants for full-fledged mages merely by association, even despite what second sight suggests. They might not all be wrong or have strange auras, but they can all seem in league with each other. Why else would they be working together? Are hunters right to confront these servants just like they would witches? Perhaps, if acolytes and apprentices know what they're doing and with whom they're allied, but perhaps not if acolytes are asleep to the truth and just do their jobs. It might even be possible that a servant who's abused by his master might be willing to change allegiance to the hunters if it means getting revenge against, profit from, or power over a boss or master.

A mage's second kind of helper is the familiar. The term probably conjures up images of a hag's black cat, and sometimes this stereotype is accurate. That's far from the only possibility, though. Some familiars are very bizarre. Any kind of animal is possible, most likely domestic or regional ones like cats, dogs, birds or rats. But some mages forge bonds with more unusual animals like tigers, birds of prey, or bears. But a familiar doesn't need to be an animal. Some warlocks may inspire their computer systems to become helpers. Others may have strange, otherworldly beasts such as imps or automatons at their disposal. *All* familiars appear distinctly alien to second sight. Hunters have no idea what these animals' or creatures' purpose may be, though. Are they more than just pets? Closer inspection or surprise contact may prove the beings to be much more than ordinary animals. But where does their intelligence come from and how can they have it?

BICYCLE MESSENGER*Coming through, buddy!*

Prelude: Volkas Shustack was born in Lithuania, but left that country when he was six, smuggled aboard a plane in a steamer trunk. He arrived in Boston and was promptly fetched by an Americanized extended family. They largely ignored him until he was of age to drop out of school and start working to feed his nephews, nieces, grandmothers and grandfathers. He became a small-time thief, discovering the ins and outs of Boston's hyper-chaotic street system, exploring every back alley and shadowy thoroughfare that he could. One of his most lucrative angles was stealing bicycles from racks and parking meters and selling them. He always kept a few of the nicer bikes for himself, and he used them on his petty crime sprees.

His foray into crime ended when he had a close call with a shooter and he decided to go "legit." He didn't leave the criminal world wholesale; he operated as an under-the-radar bike messenger, carrying packages for shady characters and corporations. Willing to carry just about anything for the right price, Volkas wound up transferring packages and envelopes for a few high-paying clients — not to his knowledge, they were *warlock* clients. One day while picking up a black box with rounded edges, he was caught in some kind of struggle. Some weird shit happened to the space around him and before he knew it, he was pulled in and spit out the other side — of town.

Since then, he's seen and heard some pretty strange things. He doesn't know exactly who or what he's dealing with, but he knows they can do some pretty freaky stuff, and that they have deep pockets.

Concept: Tall and lanky, Volkas leans his head forward and zips down city streets. He has quick physical reactions and a vulpine face.



Roleplaying Hints: Who cares what's in that box? So what if that envelope has a few red stains on it? You have some very happy, very important and very unusual bosses. It's your job, and you can feed your whole family with the pay from one run. Keep your head down and always look for the quickest escape route.

Equipment: Trek cycle, helmet, gloves, pepperspray, handful of stolen credit cards

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity (Quick Reactions) 4, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits (Swift) 4

Abilities: Alertness (Responsive) 4, Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Investigation 1, Security 2, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 1, Resources 2

Willpower: 5

FALCON

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Perception 4, Intelligence 2

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 4

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, -1, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Claw with talons or attack with beak for 1 die

Powers: Secrets of the Mind 1, Secrets of the Body 2

Roleplaying Hints: You have been with your mistress for years now. The relationship is amusing — she thinks she controls you, but you know it's the other way around. People are dirty, always scratching and molesting themselves. They do not have your poise, your dignity. Not to mention your senses. Should you choose, you could spot the wriggling tail of a rat from a half-mile above. One of these days they'll realize how important you are.

MAGIC

Reality is like clay to a mage. Their "magic" is the power to mold that clay — the hands to shape it, the tools to sculpt it and the kiln to fire it into firmament. With a simple wish and the will to back it up, a mage's magic is an unending well of possibility. In theory, wizards' power is limitless. The key phrase here is "in theory." Manipulators don't just wake up one day with the capacity to create and destroy universes. This immense power must be cultivated. It starts very small — a candle flame compared to a conflagration. This capability grows as a witch learns and extends her awareness of reality, and as her faculty for both abstract thought and intuition increases. But there are rules. Mages wish there weren't, and some believe any rules should be ignored completely. Others abide stridently by them, understanding that reality is a stubborn medium that resists being tugged and pushed with impetuous hands. Like the rules or not, mages must acknowledge the following "commandments" of reality and the magic that can transform it.

TYPES OF MAGIC

If a manipulator wishes to affect or change something in the world around her, she may apply her magic in two ways. One is a quick and easy path that has consequences. The other, subtle magic, is a quiet means that requires more thought and effort.

The easy path might be called obvious magic. It's just what it sounds like — a magical effect that's plain to all who witness it. If a mage overturns a car with nothing more than the power of her own mind, that's obvious magic at work. Other applications might include firing lightning from her eyes or flaying the skin off someone with nothing more than the use of her fingers. These effects are all clearly outside the realm of what normal people consider possible. When was the last time you saw someone in your local shopping mall set fire to the calendar kiosk with a jet of flame pouring from his hands?

Obvious magic is simple. It takes no finesse and little effort, but it presents a whole host of problems. One of which is simply that the blatancy of such power attracts attention. People usually rationalize events in their own clouded brains. ("He must have had flame throwers strapped to his arms! Bizarre!") Or they turn a blind eye to what happens, incapable of digesting it mentally. But perform too many bizarre feats often and someone will notice. Other manipulators? The Technocracy? The government or media? Hunters?

ESCAPING THE MIND'S EYE

Witches dedicate their lives, bodies and minds to mastering supernatural energies. As a result, they exist in part beyond the physical realm. It's difficult for material reality to pinpoint them. People tend not to notice them, their faces do not make much of an impression, cameras tend to malfunction in their presence, and computer files about them become corrupt. Wizards aren't invisible (unless they use their arts to become so), and this tendency doesn't necessarily allow them to disappear from combat. But it does make them elusive for those who would try to find or record them, and ordinary people can have trouble remembering where they saw mages, under what circumstances and what exactly happened.

Subtract a wizard's highest art rating (up to a limit of 5) from the dice pools of those trying to remember, trace, track, investigate, find or stalk him, while adding the same number of dice to the wizard's Stealth attempts.

This tendency does not affect hunters with active Conviction. Their dice pools to recall, track or locate a wizard are not reduced, although they might have trouble remembering what a target looks like in scenes where Conviction is not active.

There's a more pervasive problem when a mage resorts to obvious magic. Humanity as a whole creates a sweeping, unconscious idea of reality. This idea essentially defines what is possible versus what is not possible. Manipulators deem this to be the consensus. Humanity unknowingly imprints limitations on reality, which warlocks violate through magic (throwing fireballs falls into the "not possible" category, for example). People instinctively believe that doing so is impossible. Perceived evidence (through both science and day-to-day life) supports the idea that creating fire out of nowhere, turning a linoleum floor into liquid mercury or throwing chairs around a room with one's mind is not possible. Can't happen. Never happens. No problem.

It is a problem for the mage who tries to perform such feats. To him, these phenomena are possible, even though the consensus says otherwise. The difference is a simply a matter of believing that the impossible is possible. Unfortunately, the force of humanity's belief overwhelms the determination and hope of a manipulator. As a result, attempting vulgar, obvious effects is akin to taming a wild dog by trapping it in a bag and beating it with a stick. The dog bites, gnashes and fights, and attacks anyone it sees upon being set free.

Reality bites back, too, and a mage is likely to suffer for it. This punishment is backlash, and can take many forms. One is damage. A mage is physically injured in the process of defying the consensus. He suffers burns, broken bones or severe bruises. Blood may squirt from his ears or nose. Backlash can take other forms as well. A manipulator may suffer no damage but all the people around her may suddenly be slapped with pain. Or weirder events may occur. As reality attempts to re-adjust itself and stabilize, everyone in the area may suffer a hallucination. This can be a brief shift in reality — perhaps the mage's eyes turn a single, solitary color, or all nearby food spoils or emits a foul odor. The effects of this re-stabilization can be terrifying, not to mention, permanent. Powerful magic gone horribly awry can lead to some extreme effects. Skin may melt off, objects may disappear and never return (or turn up 600 miles away), or memories may mix and blur together to form a chaotic soup in all minds in the vicinity. Backlash is the price a manipulator pays for deliberately going against the grain of "accepted" reality.

That's why a lot of mages attempt the second, sneakier path to achieve their effects — subtle magic. This approach is a mage's way to duck under cover, using the backdoor to achieve a desired effect without getting caught by reality's "censors." With subtle magic, a witch appears to play by the rules — and that's all that matters to reality.

For example, a witch knows he shouldn't shoot streams of fire from his fingertips, because nobody would believe it's possible. If he wants to use magic to burn down a house, he has to figure out a way to fool the consensus and make it appear as if he does nothing out of the

ordinary. It takes a bit of logic and effort, but as long as a witch meets reality halfway, reality is likely to accommodate her. The witch applies her magic to existing elements to achieve the desired effect. To burn the house down, he can rationalize, "The people who live there have a gas oven. Someone must have left the darn thing on. Wouldn't it be a shame if someone had *also* left a candle burning in the living room? Why, that would surely start a fire...." And then a fire breaks out, the house burns down and no one is the wiser. It doesn't matter that no one left the oven on — or whether there was a gas oven in the house. Nor does there have to be a lit candle in the living room. It's only necessary for a string of events to be possible, that people in general could believe that combination of phenomena. Even if someone considers the event "suspicious," she still believes that it happened within the bounds of possibility. It's a lot more believable than seeing a man shoot fire from his hands. Reality is thus appeased, the consensus is not disturbed, and the manipulator gets by unscathed while still fulfilling his intended goal.

OBJECTS OF FOCUS

Inexperienced mages can require "crutches" to perform magic. Anything from a laptop computer to a small silver charm bracelet is an object that allows wizards to "focus" their minds on a task at hand. These tools are often mundane in origin and do not contain any inherent magic, but they do *channel* magic. A warlock may have one or more to choose from to perform various feats. The key thing to remember is that these items are intensely personal to sorcerers and are in tune with a witch's personality. Some eco-terrorist manipulator is unlikely to rely on a set of virtual-reality goggles as a focus, for example. Nor is a computer hacker likely to use an iron cauldron or satanic grimoire as the focus of his concentration. Rather, the eco-terrorist might use a well-worn walking stick and the hacker could focus on a bundle of 10/100 cable around his wrist.

Such objects may stand out as unusual to a hunter using the Discern edge to look at a mage. Even without observation edges, a mage's focus shows up as corrupt or tainted to second sight. The object itself is not magical, but it lends itself to magical phenomena. A clever hunter using an edge such as Pinpoint may be able to identify the item as a source of power, destroying it and interfering with a wizard's capacity to perform magic. (See *Magic Systems*, p. 105, for the effects of destroying or interfering with the use of a focus.)

A mage requires a focus for every art she possesses. (A sorcerer with *Secrets of the Body*, *Foundation* and *Spiritualism* needs three tools, for example.) Once he attains the third level in an art, however, he no longer requires his old crutch.

QUINTESSENCE

What powers a manipulator's magic? What greases the supernatural engine and allows a witch to twist the world to her selfish whims? It would seem that all mon-

sters gain strength from some source. Leeches draw upon blood. Ghosts feed on negative emotions, allowing them to perform phantasmagoric tricks. But what about witches?

Spellbinders draw upon Quintessence, an energy that exists in just about everything on the planet. But it's not just free for the taking on every street corner. A few unique or special places tend to pool it, and sometimes items like crystals are infused with it. Mages gather and save this energy to power their "spells."

PLACES OF POWER

Just as manipulators are invested with magic, sometimes places have similar power and energy. How do they acquire this quality? It's hard to say, and in truth, many witches don't know the answer. One possibility is that some regions acquire a certain resonance simply by being frequented by or associated with wizards. Sometimes mages practice their art in a place, or they may

HUNTERS ARE PEOPLE, TOO

Anybody who has read *Mage: The Ascension* knows that backlash is essentially just a simplified version of Paradox. Backlash bites a manipulator on the ass hard when ordinary people witness obvious magic. Sleepers are the unwitting authorities on reality's rules. They enforced the division between what's possible and what's not possible. But what's up with hunters?

Hunters are considered to be normal people. That's right. They're essentially sleepers. They may be aware of monsters' existence and know that there's a second world out there, but they're not a part of magic. They don't have avatars. They aren't awakened as mages define the term. They're still Joe Reality, and their minds are a part of the grand tapestry of the consensus. As such, if a manipulator works obvious magic such as teleportation or attempts to turn water into wine before a hunter, the imbued is considered a sleeper. Even a single chosen in the area is excuse for reality to kick a mage in the teeth with backlash.

And while we're discussing such matters, let's be clear: Hunters can't become mages. Ever. They can't perform magic — not even hedge magic. They can't go to the Umbra. They don't even know what the Umbra is. Nor can they be apprentices. Whatever the Heralds do to the chosen upon the imbuing, it makes hunters antithetical to the capacity to perform magic. Should you really desire, they can be acolytes in the sense that they can perform mundane tasks for any manipulator, but they gain no magical capabilities for doing so.

Similarly, mages, technocracy agents, hedge magicians, acolytes and apprentices cannot become hunters or bystanders. The Messengers simply do not choose them based on their direct association, unwitting or not, with magic and the supernatural.

even live and work together in a single location. These locales are sometimes called chantries, but may be referred to as chapter houses, lodges or temples. Basically, it all boils down to: This is where manipulators gather. And they leave their impression on the place.

Other locales can bear an inherent, primal energy. These places (known as nodes in manipulator jargon) may be as small as a closet or as big as a stretch of wilderness. They could be anything at all—a Polynesian idol, an ancient tree growing out of a cliff face, an alleyway in the heart of a bustling city, or a 130-room plantation in the middle of a Louisiana bayou. Sometimes these places echo history, like a small church in Ireland that may emanate power because of a steady flow of faith from its parishioners. Places of death and suffering may also carry resonance: the location where the Khmer Rouge practiced its genocide, or the Philadelphia “house of horrors” where serial killer Gary Heidnik tortured, abused and murdered a handful of women.

All places of power have a rating in Quintessence, the primal energy of magic, just as warlocks do. Site scores can be high—as high as 50. Places with ratings of 1 to 10 tend to be small or localized—a graveyard, a “fairy ring” in a forest, a run-down church. Anything with a higher score could be a castle, a monastery in the mountains of Tibet, or even a discarded oil tanker whose passengers died under grisly circumstances. A manipulator can use magic associated with the Foundation art (see p. 108) to gain/drain Quintessence from these places. The sites recharge (usually at a rate of one point per night), but if all Quintessence is drained, the place is “dead” for a time, at least until another mage uses a higher Foundation rating and more potent magic to reawaken the place’s potential.

What do hunters think of such spots? Can they even see them? Yes and no. Second sight by itself can suggest that a place isn’t right somehow—perhaps it’s constantly bright or bathed in shadow—but such observations aren’t enough in themselves to reveal the true nature of a magically charged locale. Edges such as Discern, Witness or Illuminate might offer more information—that a room is larger on the inside than it is on the outside, that people have come and taken something from the spot, or that the room bears a shifting color. But, of course, those powers simply offer more information than does second sight and a hunter is still left to interpret what all this input means.

Hunters can respond to the discovery of strange places just as they do when they encounter creatures. Destroying a place is always an option. **Hunter: Book: Avenger** offers all kinds of rules on ruining structures and locales. Unless a chapter house is protected by enchantments or wards (a password is required to approach, or mundane acts do it no harm), it’s destroyed when it burns to the ground or is leveled. Same goes with

many nodes. If there’s primal power contained within some old, decrepit New England crypt, and a bunch of hunters make swift work of turning it into rubble, there’s a good chance that the Quintessence fades for a while or is lost forever.

Not only are some places difficult to destroy (imagine exhuming an entire cemetery!), but some are too powerful and won’t be wiped from the map. What then? One option is leave them alone, but few hunters are so quick to give up. Another option is to observe the locale and use it to spot or follow any creatures that frequent it. Edges might also affect places of power. Sure, Cleave and three days of toil might do some harm, but using Lock (**Hunter Book: Defender**, p. 75) might deny a manipulator access to a magical site. A hunter may also choose to mar a location by using Brand or Balance. The effort might actually *disrupt* the magical nature of a spot or stop the flow of its power.

Beyond that, what would your average hunter think about such a place? Since there is no “average hunter,” there is no clear-cut answer. One hunter may be intensely curious (enough to sneak inside) while another may feel that such a locale is a wound on the landscape and needs to be eliminated. For every hunter, there is a different reaction, but all may wonder: If people and places can be tainted, what else in this world is subject to monsters’ corruption?

MAGIC SYSTEMS

Performing magic is fairly simple for mages—and for you as a Storyteller. To conjure a sorcerous effect in your game, spend one Quintessence point for each level of the spell desired (see below for relative spell levels). A Spacetime 3 spell therefore costs three Quintessence. Then roll a number of dice equal to the level of art—the realm of magic—used. If a wizard wants to erase someone’s memories, for example, roll his Spacetime score. The difficulty is based on a couple factors: the number of people/objects/size of area affected and the range of the spell. An easy effect might involve one or two targets or a specific spot that’s within reach. This spell might be difficulty 6 to cast, whereas a major one that affects many targets or a wide area that is far away is difficulty 9 or 10.

Wizards’ spells persist for a duration based to the following chart, unless specified otherwise.

Successes Rolled	Duration
1	One turn
2	One hour/scene
3	One day
4	One month/story
5	Six months
6+	Likely permanent

Several variables may affect a manipulator's ability to use magic.

- Being in a place of power allows a mage to cast spells at the expense of only one Quintessence point per incantation, regardless of the spell's level.

- A mage with a rating of 1 or 2 in an art requires a focus to perform magic in that sphere of influence (see p. 104). If that focus is taken away or destroyed, the difficulty to cast spells increases by two. If this penalty raises the difficulty of a spell above 10, it cannot be performed.

- When a wizard performs obvious magic, and the number of sleeper witnesses exceeds the successes gained on the magic roll, a backlash occurs. Backlash can take many forms; it's up to you to decide what is appropriate under the circumstances. The witch's eyes may turn all white, she may grow extra fingers, compasses and clocks may no longer work around her. The severity of this effect is based on the level of magic attempted. Potent spells gone awry cause significant, debilitating flaws or they trigger tragedies that may cripple the manipulator's Traits. A backlash may also cause widespread damage (by fire, lightning or even something as abstract as sound). In the latter case, roll the mage's Quintessence score against a 7 difficulty. Every success inflicts a level of lethal damage on all people/objects within the mage's Quintessence in yards, including the mage himself (at Storyteller's discretion).

Obvious magic performed where no sleeper can see does not inflict a backlash.

- Botching any spell casting roll is bad news. A botch imposes a derangement on the caster (any of the ailments listed in the **Hunter** rulebook or in the creed books will do). The condition can be cured only through magical means.

Quintessence is crucial to a mage's spells. Without it as a fuel, magic is essentially impossible. Warlocks fuel their magic with Quintessence, not Willpower as detailed in **Hunter's** Enemy chapter. Warlocks still possess Willpower, though, and they use it in the ways detailed elsewhere in the **Hunter** rules. Warlocks have Willpower ratings anywhere from 7 to 10. Young or inexperienced mages start with 3 Quintessence. Proven mages usually have 6 to 9 points. Manipulators of massive power have 10 to 15 points. (And sending lowly hunters up against even one of these masters is likely to be a death sentence.) There are multiple ways a mage can regain their spent energy.

- A mage gains a point of Quintessence upon waking from a full night's sleep (six to eight hours).

- In a place of power, a mage can sleep for a full night and regain *all* lost Quintessence.

- A mage can meditate to regain lost Quintessence. Roll Wits + Intuition, difficulty 7. Each success restores one point. This effort requires at least one hour, if not

more, at your discretion, based on the warlock's interruptions, injuries and preoccupations.

- In a place of power, a mage can meditate using the same rules as above, but the difficulty is 5 instead of 7.

- Using Foundation 2, a mage can steal Quintessence from places of power, normal humans or magical objects. Note, however, that each of these sources stores a finite amount of Quintessence, and if drained, becomes magically useless until recharged. Consider the average person to have one point.

LIMITATIONS OF HEDGE MAGIC

Craft magicians (see p. 90) suffer serious limitations when it comes to spell casting. Their Quintessence never rises higher than 5. They cannot cast spells rated higher than 2 in any given art. And, their difficulties to perform magic are increased by one compared to other mages' efforts.

MAGICAL POWERS

There are seven magical arts (sometimes called "spheres") that a mage can master: Elements, Fortune, Foundation, Secrets of the Body, Secrets of the Mind, Spacetime and Spiritualism. The kinds of mages that hunters are likely to encounter have no more than five points in any given art. As a mage's rating in an art increases, she not only has an easier time casting spells, but she acquires new understanding and capabilities as the potency of her magic grows. Hunters probably come across relatively inexperienced, "street" wizards with three to four points scattered across all seven arts. More capable and dangerous manipulators may have as many as five to six points among the spheres. Warlocks of extraordinary (read: insane) power may have up to 10 to 11 points available among the arts.

Below are detailed explanations of each of the spheres, with a sampling of "spells" that may be used by manipulators. The incantations described are likely to be used on or before hunters. Hence, most of these tricks are fairly low-powered as mage capabilities go. As Storyteller, you can create any spell effects you feel suit your story and the situation. The spells shown are only examples, so feel free to take the ball and run with it.

Each art description lists an aura color. This is the image that Illuminate users tend to see around mages, particularly those whose highest art score is in the sphere in question.

SUBTLE MAGIC

Many of the spell effects listed here may seem overt, and they are. It merely takes a quick wit on your part to turn any obvious effect into a subtle one. Even something as blatant as a fireball launched through the air can be made subtle if considered in the light of plausibility. ("That gas main just broke and caught on a spark.") This approach takes only a moment to consider onlookers' possible per-

TECHNOCRAT MAGIC

Technocrats, we know, don't do things like regular mages do. They don't open a spell book and wave around a rain-stick to achieve an effect. They utilize a sort of *hyper-science* combined with strange technology to alter the world around them. All the arts and accordant spells listed here are fair game for a technocrat manipulator. The end results are the same, but the means of achieving them are quite different. A witch may look into a mirror to teleport herself, while an agent steps into a "Matter Transference Portal" to achieve the same result. A witch might predict or control the outcome of a die roll by waving a set of bones, while a company man may whip out some ultra-high-tech, palm computer, punch in a bunch of numbers, and announce coldly: "I predict that the following dice rolls will yield these results..." It's all a matter of perspective. What the regular witch does can look like hocus-pocus. What the agent does can look like advanced science, but the results are all the same.

ception of a spell. The effect is the same. It's the manner in which it occurs to witnesses that matters to reality.

ELEMENTS

Mages who study this sphere gain insights into and control over the four elements of the world — fire, air, water and earth. But their influence extends beyond even those to include other natural phenomenon, including weather, temperature, lightning, radio waves and the ultraviolet spectrum. As a manipulator's comprehension in this sphere grows, so does her understanding and capacity to shape and even generate these forces. (Elements' aura color is green.)

Elements 1: Perceive Elements (such as: see radio waves, sense the whole light spectrum, determine material composition of any object)

Elements 2: Alter Elemental Flow (such as: raise/lower temperature, cut off electricity to a whole building, extinguish fires)

Elements 3: Manipulate Dangerous Elements (such as: channel lightning, transmute lead into gold, turn the air in someone's lungs into water)

Elements 4: Create Complex Elements (create complex objects out of thin air, transform any item into another item, change chemical composition of any inorganic material)

Elements 5: Cataclysmic Elemental Manipulation (uproot mountains with a thought, create enormous typhoons, destroy landscapes with the sweep of a hand)

Spells

Elemental Awareness: Requires Elements 1. With this spell, the manipulator is never deprived of her senses,

even if her eyes are gouged out or her eardrums are punctured. In her mind, she can "see" through any obfuscation (dark, fog, supernatural concealment). She can hear in her mind, as well, allowing her to tap into subsonic spectrums, or even listen in on cell-phone conversations that flit through the air. Successes achieved in your Elemental roll are rolled as Perception dice that the mage is able devote to this pursuit. This spell can be used to spot a hunter using Hide; the difficulty of the mage's roll to notice the imbued is 4 rather than the usual 6.

Telekinesis: Requires Elements 3. With this spell, a manipulator can move small or large objects with the power of her mind. A crowbar may fly out of a hunter's hand — and into his head. Cars may roll downhill spontaneously. A tea cup could fly around the room as if wielded by a poltergeist. The larger the object the witch wishes to move, the more successes that must be rolled — say one for a tea cup to four for a boulder. Standard use of this spell is obvious magic, but a mage can make this effect subtle. The aforementioned car rolling down the hill — well, the handbrake must not have been set. And the crowbar? The hunter must have had a muscle spasm.

FORTUNE

Fortune is a common focus among newly trained witches. It allows the determination (and later, the manipulation) of chance, coincidence or "fate," and the sphere lends itself quite nicely to phenomena such as divination, blessings and curses. (Fortune's aura color is purple.)

Fortune 1: Sense Fate (such as: predictions and divination)

Fortune 2: Manipulate Fate (such as: fixing a slot-machine to give a big pay-out, making all traffic lights turn green for a trip)

Fortune 3: Trigger Fateful Events (such as: create "freak occurrences" such as guns jamming, people tripping or doorknobs falling off just as people try to escape)

Fortune 4: Trigger Fateful Patterns (such as: "curses" or "blessings" that can induce terrible luck or sudden fortune)

Fortune 5: Create Massive Entropy (such as: cause buildings to suddenly fall into disrepair or even collapse, create a widespread computer virus, cause sickness or even plagues)

Spells

Always a Winner: Requires Fortune 2. Games of luck and chance are the *forte* of the witch wielding this spell. Roulette wheels land magically on a chosen number. The warlock always manages to get Blackjack. Dice land as the manipulator chooses. It can even be as simple as: "Hey, pick a random number. I'll bet you \$50 I can guess what it is." Higher successes equate to an increasing chance to predict and control probability (one success = manipulate a coin toss, five successes = manipulate every roulette wheel in Las Vegas to land on one number).

Clumsy: Requires Fortune 3. Hunters who face a sorcerer at this level of accomplishment are besieged by their environment. This trick localizes random chance to create hazards for antagonists. What are the chances that a hunter trips on a phone cord while trying to rush the manipulator? Or falls down the stairs? Or swings that tire iron into a power line? All very high if the witch gets her way. Each success allows one "freak accident" to occur at a moment of the witch's choosing throughout the duration of the spell.

FOUNDATION

Many manipulators believe that reality is based on a fundamental mystical (or pseudo-scientific) energy. Foundation allows them to sense that force, harness it and inevitably change it. All witches see that property somewhat differently. Some believe it to be an underlying occult energy, while others consider it the providence of the "one, true God." Technocrats might call it "quarks" or "the ether spectrum." Whatever the label, it's about the basic building blocks of reality. (Foundation's aura color is silver.)

Foundation 1: Sense Mystical Energies (such as: see the magic effects of other supernatural beings, perceive use of subtle hunter powers such as Discern or Witness, detect auras, locate places of power)

Foundation 2: Borrow Mystical Energies (such as: gain Quintessence points from regular people, places of power or magical objects)

Foundation 3: Manipulate Mystical Energy (such as: counteract preternatural powers such as hunter edges, drain Conviction from hunters, damage mortals via Quintessence theft)

Foundation 4: Create/Remove Mystical Energy (such as: make any object a Quintessence battery, wither "souls" of living creatures, destroy ghosts)

Foundation 5: Destroy Reality (such as: make a whole city block fade from existence, "unmake" a hunter by severing her access to the Messengers, kill entire crowds of people by destroying souls)

Spells

Conversion: Requires Foundation 3. There is something about a hunter's Conviction. It's more than just determination — it's a force conferred by the Heralds, a battery powering a once "inert" person. Mages don't have Conviction, but that's not to say they can't use it. With this spell, a mage can steal a hunter's Conviction point by point, convert it, and use it as Quintessence. For every success achieved, the mage can steal one point of a hunter's Conviction and convert it to one point of Quintessence. This effect cannot be performed on a hunter with active second sight.

Conviction Meltdown: Requires Foundation 4. Manipulators who are this well-versed in the mystical energies of "reality" cannot only sense hunters, they can

SENSING HUNTERS

Mages can sense hunters, but only if they know what to look for and if they set their sights on doing so. If a wizard has reason to look, to scan a whole crowd, he can use Foundation 2 to spot a hunter. The trick is this: He can only spot a hunter whose second sight is *active*. If a hunter is using second sight and the mage's spell casting roll succeeds, the will worker can see a golden halo or aura surrounding the hunter. Consider each success to allow a mage to spot a single hunter. So, four successes allow a mage to spot four hunters.

But again, this is only if the mage knows what to look for. Under most circumstances, hunters seem like just more sleepers. One way a mage may stumble upon the need to "look" for the imbued could be witnessing overt edges such as Cleave or Ravage in use. Or Foundation 1 might be used for any given reason and, if enough successes are achieved (four or more), the mage might see a hunter's subtle powers such as Discern or even Hide at work. (Yes, in this case, Hide actually might cause a hunter to stand out rather than disappear.)

also sense their source of power and when it's accessed. A manipulator using this spell has the ability to "shut off" the Conviction that a hunter uses to access second sight. The spell doesn't sever the connection permanently, though. It merely causes a hunter to "go blind" until another point is spent for her to reactivate the sight and its defenses. In the process, the spell also removes Conviction points from the hunter: Each success removes a single point of Conviction from the victim. Having second sight and its defenses active when this spell is cast does not protect the hunter from the effect.

SECRETS OF THE BODY

The physical form is the plaything of witches who study this art. They possess a deep understanding of biology, whether that of humans, animals or plants, and they can manipulate and influence bodies on a whim. (Secrets of the Body's aura color is red.)

Secrets of the Body 1: Body Sense (such as: sense all creatures nearby, even in a dark room or at night; determine age, sex, health of any human or animal)

Secrets of the Body 2: Manipulate Simple Life (such as: cause a plant to wither or flourish; modify the bodies of simple animals such as mice, fish or bacteria; heal her own body)

Secrets of the Body 3: Manipulate Complex Life/ Create Simple Life (such as: heal other humans, create sicknesses, conjure room full of bats or rats out of nowhere)

Secrets of the Body 4: Radical Body Manipulation (such as: create knives out of fingers, erase someone's hands and feet, turn eyes to jelly)

Secrets of the Body 5: Biological Mastery (such as: extend her own life or another's indefinitely, create a sort of "immortality," determine and change the day someone is going to die, create human life like a Frankenstein)

Spells

Sense Sickness: Requires Secrets of the Body 1. Even the youngest students of this art have the capacity to determine the relative health of a living creature. The more successes achieved, the more in-depth the information gained about a subject. One success may allow a

manipulator to know that a subject is sick, whereas four tell him that there is a malignant tumor of significant size growing on a subject's lung.

Swarm: Requires Secrets of the Body 2 (to summon) or 3 (to create). Some mages can summon a whole swarm of pests — spiders, flies, rats, bees, bats. Others can create these swarms out of thin air. These creatures are under limited control and can plague victims. Each success gained in your Body roll removes one success from actions that victims try to make. Therefore, three successes with this spell remove three successes from a hunter's effort to shoot at a sorcerer. This spell seems blatant, but it can be subtly performed. Perhaps there happens to be a trash pile nearby that's home to the swarm.

SECRETS OF THE MIND

The mind is a complex thing. It seemingly exists outside the brain, with a thousand layers of conscious, subconscious and even psychic thought. Manipulators versed in this art can sense, change and destroy the minds of others. The sphere encompasses the realms of telepathy, dreams, and mind and emotional control. (Secrets of the Mind's aura color is blue.)

Secrets of the Mind 1: Sense Minds (such as: pick up vague surface thoughts of others, protect her own mind from manipulation, determine the emotions of others)

Secrets of the Mind 2: Read Minds (such as: eavesdrop on thoughts; dig deep into the subconscious of another; sort through someone's memories, urges or impulses)

Secrets of the Mind 3: Manipulate Minds (such as: plant simple urges or commands, establish telepathic communication, modify someone's emotions)

Secrets of the Mind 4: Control Minds (such as: total mental control of another, making another a puppet; edit/create/erase memories; inflict insanity)

Secrets of the Mind 5: Mind Mastery (such as: switch minds between bodies, create new intelligence in creatures, destroy and re-write someone's entire personality)

Spells

Scan Minds: Requires Secrets of the Mind 2. It's pretty creepy to have the contents of your brain repeated back to you verbatim. Mages with this spell have that capability. It can be subtle, however. They can surreptitiously rifle through the contents of a person's head without the subject ever knowing. An unsuspecting hunter may inadvertently give up the location of his group's hideout, the existence of hunter-net, or even the contents of messages he has received from the Heralds. More successes allow a mage to acquire a greater depth of information. One success may allow for simple surface thoughts and impulses to be read, while three may give detailed, conscious information. The subconscious realm is reserved for five successes or more. Note that active Conviction resists the effects of this spell.

POWER, SPEED AND ENDURANCE

POWER

A warlock can increase his own might upon attaining Secrets of the Body 3.

System: Spend three Quintessence points and roll Secrets of the Body (difficulty 6). Each success adds one Strength point for a duration indicated by the total successes rolled.

SPEED

A wizard with the capacity to manipulate Spacetime 3 can step out of time's flow to move and act more quickly, at least to human eyes.

System: Spend three Quintessence points. For each point of Spacetime a wizard possesses, he can take an extra action in a turn by speeding time up for himself. Each action must be dedicated to one feat only. Multiple feats — casting a spell *and* operating a computer, for example — cannot be performed in the same action.

Sorcerers not wanting to deal with Spacetime (or those with no comprehension of that art) may increase their Dexterity through Secrets of the Body 3. Spend three Quintessence points and roll the wizard's Body rating (difficulty 6). Each success adds one Dexterity point for a duration indicated by the total successes rolled.

ENDURANCE

A warlock with a rating of 3 or more in Secrets of the Body can make himself inhumanly tough.

System: Spend three Quintessence points and roll Secrets of the Body (difficulty 6). Each success adds one Stamina point for a duration indicated by the total successes rolled.

Any wizard can also use Secrets of the Body 2 to heal his own injuries. Each success rolled recovers one health level, whether lost to bashing or lethal damage. It takes an action to heal a level. Healing might even be applied to others with Secrets of the Body 3.

In general, wizards are treated as humans. They have seven health levels, they cannot soak lethal damage (unless you decide otherwise), and they are subject to all wound penalties.

CONVICTION RESISTANCE

A hunter with active Conviction is well-defended against supernatural effects that influence the control of his mind, emotions and body. It's no different against mages. Some of the powers and spells discussed here (especially those under Foundation, Secrets of the Body and Secrets of the Mind) can be resisted if a hunter has second sight active. For example, a mage intent on twisting a hunter's consciousness through Secrets of the Mind cannot do so if Conviction has been spent for the hunter that scene. A hunter's Conviction can even protect him from an extremely potent magical effort such as an attempt to sever the chosen from the Messengers, permanently. See the rulebook's "Reacting with Conviction" (p. 133) and "Storyteller Prerogative" (p. 135) for more possibilities.

Also remember that hunters can never leave the material world. They cannot enter the spirit world or be transported there as might be attempted with Spiritualism. Nor can they see beyond the physical world into other realms or dimensions. Part of the Messengers' influence over the imbued is a prohibition against such otherworldly travel and contact; the chosen are firmly a part of this reality, at least when they're still alive, that is.

Emotional Roller Coaster: Requires Secrets of the Mind 3. Emotions are as much a part of the mind as is rational thought. To a mage using this trick, others' emotions are pliable. A witch can make a furious hunter break down crying or suddenly experience a profound calm. Note that active Conviction resists the effects of this spell.

SPACETIME

Time and space. Are they one and the same? Not to most people, but to manipulators they're so closely related that affecting one affects the other. Witches immersed in this art are able to extend their senses backward and forward in time and out into space, manipulating the space-time continuum. (Spacetime's aura color is black.)

Spacetime 1: Simple Spatial/Temporal Sense (such as: move senses backward or forward a short distance in time, determine precise distance between two objects even if those objects are a continent apart)

Spacetime 2: Complex Spatial/Temporal Sense (such as: spy on anyone, anywhere on earth or in space; transmit senses backward or forward in time by dozens of years)

Spacetime 3: Manipulate Space/Time (such as: teleport anywhere, slow or quicken the flow of time, pull objects to hand from anywhere in material reality)

Spacetime 4: Create Space/Time Complexities (such as: exist in multiple places at once, teleport others, freeze time locally or globally)

Spacetime 5: Space/Time Mastery (such as: travel forward or backward in time; leave the time stream; teleport whole city blocks to the moon)

Spells

Banish Item: Requires Spacetime 3. Imagine that a hunter has a manipulator in his crosshairs and suddenly, *poof!*, all his bullets are gone. Or the scope. Or the rifle. Where did they go? Only the warlock knows. Using this spell can effectively teleport an item "away" to a place of the wizard's choosing. More successes allow increasingly larger items to be affected. One success teleports a coin, three teleport a manhole cover and five teleport a whole

PURE LUCK

If you're not altogether certain how magic should look to hunters who are ignorant of its permutations (and almost all hunters are), you can always describe witches' capabilities as luck. To the uninitiated, mages are some lucky sonofabitches. Call it coincidence, synchronicity, destiny—a sorcerer just seems to come out on top almost every time.

When a wizard needs money, it'd be too obvious to create cash out of thin air. Instead, he might walk up to a pay phone on a lark, check the coin slot—and find a wadded-up \$100 bill. Or he might go to an ATM, punch a few buttons and whoops, there's an extra \$4,000 in his account. Or the machine spits out bills.

A hunter who faces off against a manipulator soon wonders if reality has it in for him. There might be a tear in a carpet that trips him up at a crucial moment. His bullet is a dud. And so is the next one. And the next. A cop just happens to be turning the corner.

The fine point is, few or none of these coincidences appear to be magic. There may be hints, because such convenient developments seem to occur only in proximity to the sorcerer. The witch keeps rubbing a strange medallion around her neck, or the agent keeps adjusting the settings of some kind of wristwatch. If the magic used is subtle, it passes by a hunter's eyes, second sight and even observation edges undetected. None of a hunter's special capabilities allow her to discern the truth behind a mage's "luck." It simply appears that reality is very accommodating for the mage. Although no one would know it, it's all magic at work ensuring a mage's good fortune. If a hunter wants to solve the mystery of a strange person's blessings, she has to rely on judicious use of surveillance, investigation and legwork, not necessarily Messenger-bestowed capabilities.

house. It's hard to make this effect subtle, but not impossible. It can be made to appear that the banished object drops through a hole in the floor. (That hole may not have been there previously, but that doesn't really matter.) More likely, a warlock simply uses this capability away from sleepers' prying eyes.

Slow Time: Requires Spacetime 3. A manipulator applying this trick can "slow" time down around an individual to make her feel like she's either moving underwater or that the manipulator himself moves quickly. Every success reduces the target's Initiative by two, and eliminates a die from all her dice pools for the duration of the spell.

SPIRITUALISM

Spiritualism was once an occult movement that dealt in communication with "forces from beyond." Manipulators with this understanding can, for all intents and purposes, do that very thing. They can contact ghosts, the undead (zombies, not vampires), angels, demons and their own familiars. The sphere allows for communication, summoning, banishing and even the creation of such entities. (Spiritualism's aura color is white.)

Spiritualism 1: Sense Spirits (such as: see ghosts, sense spiritual possession, locate haunted places)

Spiritualism 2: Spiritual Communication (such as: talk with ghosts or other spirits, sense spirits' emotions)

Spiritualism 3: Control Spirits (such as: command spirits to do demands, force a spirit to possess an object or person, summon spirit or ghost, control zombie)

Spiritualism 4: Enter Spirit World (such as: allow for a mage's entry into the sub-material realm where ghosts seem to exist, create a convenient "escape" route)

Spiritualism 5: Spiritual Mastery (such as: remove someone's soul from his body, essentially killing him and making him a "ghost"; sever a hunter's connection to the Messengers and Conviction; conjure or destroy armies of ghosts/spirits; animate the dead, permanently)

Spells

Sense Messengers: Requires Spiritualism 2. Using this spell, a mage can sense a hunter's connection to the Messengers — though only if she knows to look for it through other means (see "Sensing Hunters," p. XX). It is at your discretion whether a sorcerer with sufficiently high Spiritualism (5) or one who gets enough successes (five) in a Sense Messengers roll can discern who or what the Messengers really are.



Become Ghost: Requires Spiritualism 4. A mage becomes insubstantial like a ghost. Her powers may translate to those of spirits (at least to hunters' understanding), and the witch can interact with spirits as if they were physical beings. Note that a mage in this "condition" can be affected by hunters as a ghost is, with edges that are useful against incorporeal beings. Indeed, she is considered to be a ghost in terms of systems. Second sight and observation edges can make these sorcerers seem to be dead rather than living, mystical beings.

MAGES AND HUNTER-NET

The Internet. A vast connection of ones and zeros. A network of sounds, graphics and text that forms the greatest reservoir of information (and misinformation) that humanity has ever known. It's a progressive piece of technology, an ever-tightening web hell-bent on linking humanity in some kind of online global village.

Hunters use it, clearly. The advent of hunter-net gives the imbued their own private Internet, a place to share fears and trade misunderstanding, lies and even truths about their origins, goals and adversaries. To some hunters, the Internet is crucial to the calling. Without it, many would be floundering and lost (assuming they aren't already and simply don't know it).

It's fair to say that manipulators turn to the Internet as well, though for different reasons. Despite their reliance on some archaic notions, mages seek to create a "progressive" world and there arguably isn't anything more progressive than the Internet. Mages also prize information. They love to find it, spread it all out and pick through it to find new "facts" that they can exploit in their constant renovation of reality. But as with many things, mages aren't content to do things like normal people. Maybe they see better ways and can't resist attempting them. Or maybe trodding new roads is simply a challenge. Regardless, mages don't just log onto the Internet, check their email, look at a few sites on occult information and log off. They like to explore, get into the trenches, see new sights. Manipulators even try to mold the Internet into something new and different that suits their purposes.

As a result, some wizards have a frightening talent for traversing the web. These mages travel an electronic world of backdoors and hidden sites where passwords are nothing more than digital speed bumps. Some literally input their senses via goggles, gloves (or other virtual reality gear) to see the Internet in all its glory. It's no longer text on a screen but a pseudo-physical place. These mages can go anywhere and see anything using the Internet. They know every technological sewer drain and bolthole online, and they can exploit them.

Hunter-net, however, isn't your basic website. The Powers That Be protect it, and rumor has it from moderators such as Witness1 and Dole7 that this protection grows increasingly stronger. In practice, that means mages tend to overlook hunter-net and its affiliated sites. The pages escape web-wizards' notice. Few sorcerers know about hunters, so why would they know about hunter-net? Should the time come in your chronicle, however, when mages start to notice the imbued, learn about hunters' habits, or discover hunter-net, remember that invading the site's digitally fortified walls is still a big, big deal. Breaking in and sifting through information is nigh-impossible, and even if it can be accomplished, a mage can't stay long due to the forces at work that purge and cleanse the site. A mage might be able to crack a hunter's home computer and garner information from lingering hunter-net emails, but beyond that, getting into the site wholesale is a Herculean task. Chapter 4 of this book shows what such a mage investigation of and intrusion upon hunter-net might be like, along with its repercussions.

For more on mages' possible encounters with hunter-net, see the **Hunter Survival Guide**, p. 13.

THE DIGITAL WEB

Players of **Mage: The Ascension** know that one of the primary reasons why wizards are so damn good at getting around the web is that they have their own metaphysical "Internet" — The Digital Web that mirrors the real-world one. Many mages are able to not just transfer their senses into this place, but *upload* their physical presence into it. Instead of just seeing green fluctuating code like *The Matrix*, they are capable of seeing the Internet as a physical realm.

What does this mean for your hunters? Not much, since the whole "hunters can't see into other dimensions" rule still applies, and the Digital Web counts as another dimension. You are able to play with this idea, however. A mage who is physically inside the net can be a rather unnerving presence to a hunter. Strange emails pop up, data goes missing, messages find their way to him while he's not even connected to his ISP. A mage inside the Digital Web is something of a "ghost in the machine," an ethereal data gremlin who can spook even a stalwart hunter. In fact, being haunted by a mage online could drive one of the imbued to mistrust the Internet completely. If not even his home computer is safe from monstrous intrusion, how can hunter-net be trusted?

And so, a new kind of **Hunter** chronicle may get underway, with characters who choose to eschew one of the greatest weapons available to them, yet who continue to bring the struggle to the supernatural "old school" — by physical experimentation, direct investigation and personal confrontation.

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